University of Alberta

"Listen to My Vision": William Blake and Orality

by

D. Sean Hartigan ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring 2003

National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisisitons et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 0-612-82113-7
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 0-612-82113-7

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou aturement reproduits sans son autorisation.

Canada

University of Alberta

Library Release Form

Name of Author: D. Sean Hartigan

Title of Thesis: "'Listen to My Vision': William Blake and Orality"

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

Year this Degree Granted: 2003

Permission is hereby granted to the University of Alberta Library to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly, or scientific research purposes only.

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis, and except as herein before provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatever without the author's prior written permission.

D. Sean Hartigan

D. Sean Hartigan
Box 44047
1658 Bedford Highway
Bedford, Nova Scotia
B4A 3X5

January 28, 2003

"... frown not Urizen: but listen to my Vision ..."

– *The Four Zoas*

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "'Listen to My Vision': William Blake and Orality" submitted by D. Sean Hartigan in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

James Mulvihill

David Gay

Bruce Stovel

Bruce Stovel

Wes Cooper

for D Ault

Donald Ault

January 21, 2003

Dedication

To Harry Whittier, who once said,

"Read some Blake. It'll do you good."

"The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship."

Abstract

It is not commonly noted that Romantic-era literary primitivism is founded on a theory of orality, of the intrinsic superiority of oral to written poetry, even in an age of print. My dissertation, an examination of issues of orality in the works of William Blake, argues that this theory is an important part of Blake's philosophy and aesthetics and that it informs his work in unexplored ways. The centrepiece of the dissertation is an analysis of Blake's model of poetic composition as spiritual dictation. I argue that this model is an adaptation of the primitivist argument, advanced by influential eighteenth-century writers like Thomas Blackwell and Robert Lowth, that the world's greatest poems (Homer, the Old Testament) must necessarily have been composed orally. Subsequent chapters explore Blake's interest in other, related aspects of primitivist theory, contending, for example, that his conspiratorial view of cultural history (explicated in the Urizen myths) is best understood as a politically radical interpretation of theories linking the decline of bardic culture and the rise of priestly religion to the historical spread of literacy. I then consider the primitivist implications of the illuminated book, arguing that this unique form of art represents Blake's attempt to redeem the commercial medium of print by infusing it with the energy of primitive orality. The thesis concludes by examining orality's place in Blake's mythology. Through a close reading of relevant sections of *The Four Zoas* and *Milton*, I offer a primitivist interpretation of the myths of Los, Milton and Tharmas, arguing that they illustrate Blake's radical vision of the possibilities and pitfalls that confront the aspiring oral bard in a world dominated by the institutions, ideologies, and media of literate priestcraft.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation owes a great deal to the extraordinary support and guidance offered by my supervisor, Dr. James Mulvihill. The experience and insight of my committee members – Dr. David Gay, Dr. Bruce Stovel, Dr. Wes Cooper, and Dr. Donald Ault – have also been an indispensable part of my doctoral experience.

And for applying her impressive formatting and proofreading talents to the work of her befuddled scholar, thanks, too, to Haidi.

Table of Contents

Foreword 1

I. William Blake and Orality: An Overview 6

- "Our Noisest Poet" 7
- Orality in Blake's Early Works 11
- Origin of the Psychological Approach to Blake's Orality 17
- Modern Theories of Orality 19
- Functional Theories of Media Effects 23
- Psychological Theories of Media Effects 25
- Orality Theory and Blake Studies 32
- Limitations of the Psychological Model 37

II. "The Childhood of the World and the Individual": Orality Theory in the Eighteenth Century 45

- Classical Roots of the Eighteenth-Century Conception of Orality 46
- Early Man and The Primacy of Poetry 49
- Poetry and Memory 50
- Passion and Mimesis 53
- "A Pleasing Simplicity, and Many Artless Graces" 61
- Literacy and the Decline of Poetry 65
- Print and the Commercialization of Poetry 72

Poetical Sketches and the Problems of Primitivism 76

Songs of Innocence: Recovery and Problematization 90

III. Practical Orality in an Age of Print: The "Dictation" Model of Poetry 98

A Historical Approach to the Dictation Model 99

The Idea of Dictation 113

Dictation, Phase I: "He Speaks in Thunder and Fire" 116

Dictation, Phase II: The Secretary to Eternity 134

Blake's Homeric Cosmos 136

Blake's Muses: Thematic Concerns 147

Problems of the Dictation Model: Revisable Inspiration 151

Problems of the Dictation Model: Conception and Execution 156

IV. From Urizen's Books to the Bible of Hell: Primitive Orality and Illuminated Printing 165

"The Primeval Priests Assum'd Power" 166

The Conspiracy to Solidify the Word 180

The Material and Spiritual Bibles 187

The Literate Basis of Deism 191

The Two Bibles in the Poetry of the 1790's 194

The Bible in its Diabolic Sense 200

The Bible of Hell 204

The Bard Buys a Printing Press 207

The Idea of Print Fixity 216

Undermining Print Fixity: The Oral Book 221

V. Regenerate Los: Orality's Fall and the Rebirth of Prophecy 231

Fate of the Bards 232

Burke and Wordsworth: Orality in Chains 235

The Fall of Orality 242

Orality as a Theme of *The Four Zoas* 244

Symbolism of the Tongue 245

The Fall of Tharmas 247

The Closing of the Gate of the Tongue 253

The Birth of Los 254

The Fallen Bard in History 260

Milton as Fallen Bard 263

Anatomy of a Fallen Bard 267

Redemption of the Fallen Bard 270

The Act of Prophetic Perception 274

The Oral Apocalypse 276

Paradise Regained 278

Afterword 283

Works Cited 290

Abbreviations Used

All quotations from William Blake are taken from *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, newly revised edition, edited by David V. Erdman (1988), hereafter cited as E followed by the relevant page number.

Foreword

Since the publication of Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), critics have recognized that Blake's illuminated poetry is a multimedia work in which media themselves are thematically important. Indeed, as Nelson Hilton and Thomas Vogler observe in their introduction to *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality* (1986), the scholarly consensus is that Blake is "the first epic poet . . . of 'media-consciousness'" (Hilton and Vogler 4). Students of Blake's theories of media have focused on his integration of the visual media of painting, engraving, and printing, but in isolating these visual elements of Blake's composite art for analysis, they have implicitly – and at times, explicitly – called attention to the *orality* of his poetic language. As Frye implies, consideration of Blake's art in terms of its "visible unit" leads logically to recognition of the equally important "audible unit" (Frye 416). While this "audible unit" has received less attention than its counterpart, it has nevertheless stimulated a small but significant body of criticism, notably in the works of Marshall McLuhan, T.R. Frosch, Robert N. Essick, and most recently, John B. Pierce.

For the most part, however, these writers have followed methodological approaches quite different from those framing the study of Blake's visual art. Advances in our understanding of Blake's theories of printing and engraving have come primarily through historicization; his practices of working with visual media, for example, have been meticulously reconstructed by Robert Essick and Joseph Viscomi (in *William Blake: Printmaker* [1980] and *Blake and the Idea of the Book* [1993]), while his theories of the place of visual art in commercial society have been historicized by Morris Eaves (in *The*

Counter-Arts Conspiracy [1992]). Studies of Blake's theories of orality, on the other hand, have examined his work almost exclusively through the lens of *twentieth-century* models of media. As the first chapter of this thesis explains, these models have their origin in the Homeric studies and anthropological work of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord, but enter the paradigm of Blake studies primarily through the influence of Marshall McLuhan and Walter J. Ong. These last writers contend that media have powerful, almost deterministic effects on the psyche ("The medium is the message," in McLuhan's famous phrase), and as the work of Frosch, Essick, and Pierce demonstrates, their arguments are highly adaptable to the study of orality in Blake.

As intriguing as these modern theories of media are, they have important weaknesses (outlined in my first chapter) of which Blake scholars have perhaps not been sufficiently aware. For this reason, my own pursuit of the meaning of Blake's orality instead uses the historicizing approach favoured by students of his visual media, a path first suggested by Essick in *William Blake and the Language of Adam* (1989). Essick here observes that Blake may have learned about the importance of formulaic structures in oral poetry (such as rhyme, meter, and repetition) from scholars of primitive poetry like John Pinkerton and Robert Lowth (Essick, *Language* 172). His main focus being elsewhere, Essick explores these proto-Romantic theories of orality only in a limited way, but by calling attention to Pinkerton's "Dissertation on the Oral Tradition of Poetry" (1781) and Lowth's widely influential *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (Latin, 1753; English trans., 1787), and indeed, to the primitivist tradition of which they were a part, he opens the door to a historical study of Blake's orality.

This approach has significant potential, for theories of orality were a vital part of Romantic-era literary culture. As Timothy Clark observes, "The valorization of oral models of communication was . . . a prominent part of that idealization of ancient and primitive cultures that characterizes the middle of the eighteenth century" (Clark 75). Among prominent scholars, historians and rhetoricians of this age, writers like Thomas Blackwell, Robert Lowth, Adam Ferguson and Hugh Blair, it was widely accepted that traditional oral poetry was superior to its modern, literate counterpart, and that the reasons for this superiority could be found in the differences between orality and literacy. My second chapter explores the roots and basic principles of eighteenth-century primitivist theories of orality by examining key works of these writers. Uniting neoclassical aesthetics and the nascent discipline of historical sociology, these theories ground Blake's primitivistic poetry from its earliest days, as an examination of his early work will show.

That Blake was a passionate practitioner of an aesthetic whose basis is a theory of orality sheds new light on many important features of his poetry. For example, Blake's model of poetic composition as spiritual dictation, a cornerstone of his mature theory of art, is clearly structured by ideas of orality and literacy. My third chapter elucidates this model of poetry by examining the similarities between Blake's argument in the introduction to *Jerusalem* and the primitivist rhetorical argument of Thomas Sheridan, founder of the Elocutionary Movement. Blake's differences from Sheridan are equally important, however, and they demonstrate that Blake rejects the Lockean underpinnings of mainstream primitivist theory in favour of an anthropomorphized, anti-materialist cosmology in which all things are imagined as living, speaking Human Forms. This cosmology is rooted in primitivist views of the conceptual modes of oral cultures, and like the dictation model of composition, represents a synthesis of Blakean philosophical principles and eighteenth-century cultural and aesthetic theories.

These theories also postulated a relationship between the invention of literacy and two historical phenomena of great interest to Blake: the fall of bardic culture and the rise of priestly religion. Blake adapts this historical model to his own political and philosophical concerns in his myths of Urizen, "primeval Priest" and creator of the "books formed of metals" that govern the fallen world (E 71, 72), a subject I investigate in my fourth chapter by comparing Blake's view of Biblical textuality, as expressed in his marginalia to the Bishop of Llandaff's *Apology for the Bible* (1797), with that advocated by Thomas Paine in *The Age of Reason* (1795). For Blake, priestly religion, materialist philosophy and the literate word are inextricably linked, and the chapter concludes by arguing that the illuminated book, Blake's own contribution to the history of literacy, may be understood as an attempt to redeem this priestly medium by infusing it with the energy of primitive orality.

Blake's historical model may also be considered as a narrative of the fall and redemption of primitive orality, the expressive medium of the ancient bards and prophets. The subjugation of orality by the ideological structures of literate priestcraft is the subject of a number of Blake's myths, notably those of Los, Milton, and Tharmas, and my fifth chapter explores these myths in the context of Blake's attitudes towards well-known orators and would-be bards of his own time. Edmund Burke and William Wordsworth are considered as exemplars of Blake's notion of *fallen* orality, while Milton, Los, and Blake himself embody *redeemed* orality, whose liberation from priestcraft (explored in this chapter through an analysis of relevant sections of *Milton* and *The Four Zoas*) empowers the revival of primitive bardic poetry Blake saw in his own work.

Ultimately, this thesis maintains that eighteenth-century primitivism contains within it theories of media that profoundly influenced Blake's views of art, history, and culture. These theories told him that orality was the "Primeval State of Man" (a state he idealized as "Wisdom, Art and Science" [E 146]) and that oral poetry was the medium of the ancient bards and prophets. Reasoning from these premises, Blake came to see orality (in its primitive, unfettered form) as the natural expressive mode of the liberated psyche, and he incorporated it into his philosophy and poetry at the deepest levels. In short, when considered historically as a key component of primitivist theory, orality shows itself to be more than a matter of minor interest in the study of Blake: it is, in fact, a theoretical pillar of his prophetic art.

Chapter I

William Blake and Orality: An Overview

This chapter considers the problems of examining the place of orality in the work of William Blake. Important critics like Robert Essick have suggested that orality is an important element of Blake's mature poetry, and historical and biographical evidence seems to support this contention. A brief examination of some of Blake's less mature work, including *An Island in the Moon* and the seasons poems from *Poetical Sketches,* indicates that orality is both prominent and thematically important even in his earliest writings. This study suggests that the small amount of criticism on this subject to date has been dominated not by traditional literary or historicizing readings, but by the application of psychological and anthropological theories drawn from other disciplines. This leads to a discussion of the history and claims of the modern theories of orality upon which this criticism is based. Psychological theories that postulate that media have innate power to effect dramatic alterations in the psyche have been particularly appealing to Blake critics, and their role in defining our critical understanding of orality in Blake is examined. Concluding sections of the chapter address the limitations of these theories, and suggest that they have been largely discredited by recent empirical research. However, certain elements of modern orality theory remain valid, and may therefore be used judiciously in the context of a historical approach to Blake's orality. This historical approach is justified by the existence in the eighteenth century of a developed and widely accepted theory of orality. The chapter that follows will examine this theory, and trace its implications in Blake's early work.

"Our Noisiest Poet"

"Blake may be our noisiest poet," Robert Essick has observed, and we do not need to look far to confirm that the oral voice, the spoken word, is an important presence in Blake's thought and work (Essick, *Language* 173). As Essick points out, orality is foregrounded to an extraordinary degree throughout Blake's poetry:

> 'Voice' occurs more frequently than any other human attribute or activity, more even than 'see' or 'human.' Forms of 'weeping' are commoner than 'God,' 'heaven,' and 'light.' We hear 'groans' more than we see 'visions'. . . . Sometimes the noises cluster together and overwhelm all other senses. 'The howlings gnashings groanings shrieking shudderings sobbings burstings / Mingle together to create a world for Los,' and a cacophony for the reader, in Night the Sixth of *The Four Zoas*. (173)

Orality shapes the very structure of the poetry, as Essick observes, for to a significant extent, Blake's poetic technique matches characteristics of traditional oral poetry as understood by eighteenth-century scholars like Robert Lowth and by modern scholars like Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord (174). "The repetitions of phrases and verse paragraphs in Blake's poetry have long been recognized," writes Essick, "but the surprising extent to which they match the characteristics of oral-formulaic verse has perhaps seemed too extravagant to merit attention" (175). After cataloguing numerous examples of these formulae ranging from simple repetitions of epithetical descriptions to recurrences of entire paragraph structures, Essick suggests that when placed next to the oral vividness of the text itself, they suggest that orality is a fundamental element of a unique model of composition best described as "oral writing" (180). The biographical record seems to support Essick's case. G.E. Bentley observes that "Blake's earliest poetry was evidently circulated, not as printed books or manuscripts, but as songs" (Bentley, *Heritage* 48), and Blake's contemporary J.T. Smith wrote that he "often heard [Blake] read and sing several of his poems. He was listened to by the company with profound silence, and allowed by most of the visitors to possess original and extraordinary merit" (qtd. in Bentley, *Records* 26). Blake's poetry may have been conceived as musical from the moment of composition, for Cunningham reports that Blake composed tunes during the writing process, and that the words and music were "the offspring . . . of the same moment" (qtd. in Bentley, *Records* 482). This habit continued throughout his life, for in his final years, we hear of him singing at the house of John Linnell, "in his old voice reciting ballads or his own songs with their own melodies" (Ackroyd 360).

Blake's social environment undoubtedly influenced him in these practices. Essick observes, "the culture of late eighteenth-century Britain . . . seems to have been far more oral and aural than our vision-dominated world today" (Essick, *Language* 172). Historically, the late eighteenth century has often been regarded as an age of print, the culmination of the age of Pope, Addison, Johnson, and Paine. But this view has been lately refined by improvements in our understanding of the complex relationship between literacy and orality in this period. Without question the century saw a tremendous development in the size of the print marketplace. By the 1790s, new books were published at four times the rate they had been at the beginning of the century (Vincent

11). Because reliable studies were not conducted until the last third of the nineteenth century, literacy rates in the age of Blake are difficult to estimate, but it seems clear that they were relatively high. Hardwick's Marriage Act of 1754 decreed that no English marriage was valid unless entered in the parish register and the record signed by the bride, groom and two witnesses. By the end of the century, at least one in three labourers and servants (the least literate class) could sign the marriage register, and by 1839, twelve years after Blake's death, sixty-seven percent of grooms and forty-nine percent of brides of all classes could sign (3). Reflecting on these statistics, Alvin Kernan remarks that "all the evidence points toward a transformation during the century from an oral-scribal society to a print society" (Kernan 48). As David Vincent points out, however, widespread literacy did not cause immediate disintegration of indigenous oral culture. Indeed, one initial effect of increased literacy in England seems to have been the *strengthening* of this culture, for the production of expensive books for the wealthy and educated was only a part of the growing industry of commercial printing. The entrepreneurs of the lower reaches of the print industry, men like the infamous Jemmy Catnach, made their money very differently, relying on bulk sales to the poor and barely literate. "It was a trade founded on pennies," as Vincent observes (200). The strict conditions of this market demanded a steady stream of inexpensive and easily marketable material. A ready supply of such material was available in the existing oral tradition, Vincent argues. The appropriation of this material by the machinery of commercial print resulted in the broadside trade, which created a cyclical interdependence between oral and print culture in England that lasted until the late nineteenth century.[1] Traditional ballads or legends with proven popular appeal were guaranteed successful print runs, and might be recited by buyers for years until the printed sheets were lost or forgotten and the songs merged back into oral tradition. Imitative ballads written by professionals might suffer the same fate, only to be picked up by later printers as genuine specimens of oral culture, and printed once more. As a final irony, printed broadsides (containing either genuine oral poetry or imitations) were frequently used by the poor to teach their children how to read and write. "This constant movement back and forth between the oral and the printed greatly complicated the work of the folklorists," Vincent observes (199). Up to eighty percent of the folk-songs gathered by twentieth-century folklorists can ultimately be traced to printed broadsides, recent research indicates (199).

---

[1] Thomas Hardy depicts the end of this mixed oral-literate culture in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, in the

Under these conditions, traditions of gathering with friends or family to *sing* aloud blended into newer traditions of gathering to *read* aloud. These related phenomena are well-represented in the period's literature. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for instance, Edward Ferrars' "tame" and "spiritless" oral reading of Cowper renders him completely unattractive to Marianne Dashwood (Austen 15). In "My First Acquaintance With Poets," Hazlitt describes passing time with Wordsworth and Coleridge at Nether Stowey by listening to them recite their poetry aloud (Hazlitt, "Acquaintance" 653). But the most animated portrait of the flourishing of orality in literate England is Blake's own *An Island*

---

characters of Tess and her mother. Although Mrs. Durbeyfield is technically literate, she lives primarily in an oral world, singing traditional ballads to herself as she works, and possessed of "a curious fetichistic fear" of her only book, *The Compleat Fortune-teller* (Hardy 61). (Compare with Walter J. Ong's observation that in oral cultures, "Writing is often regarded at first as an instrument of secret and magic power" [Ong, *Orality* 93].) As Hardy explains, the traditional oral culture of England was destroyed not by the spread of literacy, but by universal public education: "Between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained National teachings and Standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. When they were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed" (Hardy 61).

in the Moon. The drawing-room songs of Quid and the other Islanders are a miscellaneous jumble of original compositions, traditional songs ("This frog he would a wooing ride" [E 459]), and snippets of printed poetry (selections from Tichborne, Young, Cowley and others [see Erdman, "Textual Notes" 849]). In Chapter Eight, Obtuse Angle reads aloud to Steelyard from James Hervey's *Meditations and Contemplations* "till the other was quite tir'd out" (E 456), but the mood is soon lightened by a lively bit of native oral culture, the London match-seller's cry: "I cry my matches as far as Guild hall / God bless the duke & his aldermen all" (E 458). *An Island in the Moon* demonstrates the truth of Vincent's claim that the initial effect of the expansion of print literacy and the print industry in the eighteenth century was to create a *resurgence* in the vitality of the oral tradition. "At every level," says Vincent, "the sound of the human voice was magnified rather than quelled by the mass production and distribution of prose and verse. The simple relationship between the faceless publisher and the soundless reader was disrupted by men and women reciting, singing, shouting, chanting, declaiming and narrating" (Vincent 201).

Orality in Blake's Early Works

Blake's active participation in the mixed oral-literate culture is amply demonstrated in *An Island in the Moon*, but this unfinished text also shows the keen attention he paid to the specifically oral dimensions of the drawing-room singing party. His record of the Islanders' gatherings reproduces characteristics of oral speech rarely translated onto the written page. This is apparent in the stammering of the perplexed

Aradobo, for example ("I I I can't think" [E 453]), and in the startled babbling of Inflammable Gass ("Hay hay, said he, you sho, why ya ya, how can you be so foolish" [E 462]) and again in the laughter of Scopprell ("Hooooo mmy poooooor siiides I I should die if I was to live here" [E 458]). Blake's interest in the minute particulars of everyday oral speech extends to embrace the fragment as a whole, for if *An Island in the Moon* has a theme, it may well be the humourous distance between the philosophical world of literacy and the lively world of everyday orality. Certainly this gap is one of the chief sources of humour in the piece. In Chapter Eight the energetic Miss Gittipin finds Obtuse Angle and Steelyard reading Hervey and embarking on a discussion of Locke. Her comment is one many students of literature would recognize: "I never saw such company in my life. you are always talking of your books I like to be where we talk" (E 456). When the melancholy Steelyard solemnly chastises her for the rambling burst of malicious gossip that follows, "she proceeded to use every Provoking speech that ever she could" (E 457). This gives Steelyard an opportunity to practice the philosophical morality he has been studying, "& he bore it more like a Saint than a Lawgiver" (E 457). He is inspired to philosophical reflections of his own: "They call women the weakest vessel but I think they are the strongest A girl always has more tongue than a boy" (E 456). Thus improved, Steelyard demonstrates the truth of Scopprell's praise of feminine orality (which itself summarizes the comic burden of the entire chapter): "I think the Ladies discourses Mr Steelyard are some of them more improving than any book" (E 456).

The lively orality of *An Island in the Moon* is also present in Blake's earliest poetry, and again, it seems to function in thematically interesting ways. "To Spring," the first poem in *Poetical Sketches*, uses an image of orality to express a vision of the primal unity of the British land and people, which sing together "in full choir" to greet a personified Spring (E 408). In this Blakean pastoral, even the earth itself is oral and living, for "The hills tell each other, and the list'ning / Vallies hear" of Spring's coming (E 408). Vocal harmony and communication are the central symbols in this early poem, representing both an idealized national unity and a metaphysical unity of the human and natural worlds. The season poems that follow continue in this vein and interweave rich visual imagery with equally vivid aural images. In "To Summer," for example, the poetic speaker assures the season that "we oft have heard / Thy voice," and that "We lack not songs . . . Nor echoes sweet" (E 409). The musical Britain described in the preceding poem may therefore make a fit reply to Summer's own innate music, for "Our bards are fam'd who strike the silver wire" (E 409). In the third poem, the speaker invites Autumn to "tune thy jolly voice" to the speaker's "fresh pipe," and to "Sing now the lusty song of fruits and flowers" (E 409). The heart of the poem is the season's own song of the time when "Summer breaks forth into singing" (E 409). It would be premature to draw conclusions from all this singing about the significance of orality in these poems, for these poems have deep roots in pastoral tradition, and a "universal occupation" of pastoral shepherds is singing, as Helen Cooper has observed (Cooper 56). The seasonal pastorals of Pope, for example, are similarly rich in expressions of orality. His lovesick shepherds sing almost continuously (and talk about singing, in between songs), and his landscapes also participate, as in "Winter," where they tell of the death of Daphne, whose "Fate is whisper'd by the gentle Breeze / And told in Sighs to all the trembling Trees" (Pope, "Winter" 552). That the robust orality of Blake's version of pastoral has any more significance than imitation becomes clear only when we consider his first three season poems in the context of the fourth, "To Winter."

Blake's Winter is very different from his other personified seasons, each of which is a figure of exuberance and vitality. Spring is a beautiful youth, a bridegroom, and Summer a strong and "flourishing" adult who is loved by the land and people (E 409). Autumn, the season of harvest, is more sedate, but still "jolly" and full of life (E 409). In contrast to these, Winter is a skeletal "monster," a season of death who "freezes up frail life" (E 410). Significantly, Winter is also the only season who neither sings nor responds to the singing of the poetic speaker. This point is emphasized in the first line of the second stanza, where the narrator answers his own appeal to Winter with the blunt statement, "He hears me not" (E 410). Indeed, apart from his deadliness and love of power, Winter's most distinctive trait is antipathy to orality. He "withers all in silence," or at best, wrings chaotic sounds of suffering from the earth as he strides over the "groaning rocks" (E 410). He is unresponsive to all appeals, and "the mariner / Cries in vain" (E 410).

The presence or absence of oral speech and communication is thus an important means by which Blake distinguishes Winter (and everything it represents) from the other seasons (and everything they represent). Northrop Frye has argued that what they represent is quite significant, that the seasons poems demonstrate that "the main outlines of Blake's archetypal myth were in his mind from an early age" (Frye 182). The figure of Winter in particular, he argues, seems an obvious ancestor of Urizen (182). If this is the case, orality's prominence in these poems suggests that it has a significant role in Blake's proto-myth. Indeed, in aligning orality so profoundly with the non-Winter seasons, Blake seems to identify it as a mark of the non-Urizenic, a symbol (and manifestation) of the principles of life, energy, and harmonious relationship, which stand eternally opposed to the principles of death, stasis and hierarchy embodied in Winter. Orality is the linguistic-emotive expression of these positive principles as the three non-Winter seasons are their physical expressions in material Nature. These poems suggest that even at the beginning of Blake's career, orality was more than a motif, more even than a theme: it was a key element of his symbolism and his philosophy.

This becomes even more apparent when we compare Blake's depiction of Winter with its analogues in Pope and Thomson. For these poets, as for Blake, Winter differs from the other seasons as a time of silence and death. But in Pope, this silence is merely part of a neoclassical conceit in which the season expresses Nature's mourning for the death of a shepherdess. In the wake of Daphne's death, "Silence waits on *Philomela*'s strains," while "In hollow caves sweet *Echo* silent lies, / Silent, or only to her name replies" (Pope, "Winter" 553). The meaning of this silence is clear: "Now *Daphne*'s dead, and Pleasure is no more!" (553). Orality is here simply an element of pastoral convention deftly adapted to the purposes of a pretty lament. Thomson's Winter is closer in spirit to Blake's, for in both poets the season itself is the primary subject of the poem. And like Blake's Winter, who "hath rear'd his sceptre o'er the world" (E 410), Thomson's winter is also a tyrant who "reigns tremendous o'er the conquered year" (Thomson 223). His reign is primarily a period of silence and death: "How dead the vegetable kingdom lies! How dumb the tuneful!" (223). But for Thomson, the silence of Winter does not interfere with the poet's (or humanity's) relationship with the season. While Blake portrays Winter as wholly alien and frightening, a being deaf and indifferent to human suffering, Thomson finds the silences of Winter to be "kindred glooms" (185) whose influence inspires humans to serious reflection on the "lying vanities of life" (193). Winter has meaning (for all its silences) precisely *because* humans can commune with it and enter into its silence. Winter's silence becomes a metaphor for the silence of the grave, when "pale concluding Winter comes at last / And shuts the scene" of life (223). Orality functions here as a symbol of vitality, but only within a larger (and conventional) metaphor in which the seasons are seen to represent the phases of human life. Winter's silence does not separate humanity from nature, but serves as a point of meeting: we see in it the silence that awaits us after death. For Thomson, then, orality is a minor theme to be understood in terms of a moralizing Deism that sees Nature as a text in which the philosopher might read "calm reason's holy law" (202). Orality represents physical vitality, which must be lost in old age and death.

The basic elements of this view of orality are present in Blake as they are in Pope. The identification of orality with life itself (stillness and silence are the most obvious marks of death) is so obvious as to be a near-universal archetype. But in these first poems of *Poetical Sketches*, orality means more than this; it is not only a *characteristic* of the seasons (exploitable for philosophical or poetic purposes), it is the *condition* of humanity's harmonious relationship with them. When humanity speaks to the natural world and is spoken to in return, all is well, and the Golden Age of pastoral simplicity prevails. When orality ceases to define the relationship between humanity and nature (Winter "hears . . . not" the poet's song), the world becomes the place of suffering portrayed in "To Winter." To put this another way, in Blake the physical seasons themselves become metaphors for the spiritual principles they appear to embody, and orality is so intimately associated with one set of these principles (energy, life, joy) that it serves as a marker of their presence or absence. Because of this association, Blake is able to foreground these principles in his poetry simply by foregrounding orality. The effect is to transform a traditional pastoral theme into a rudimentary myth whose full implications would only be explored in the mature prophetic books. If the personifications in this myth go "a step beyond personification" in their vividness, as Frye contends (certainly this seems true in comparison with the personifications of Thomson), this too must be partially attributed to Blake's foregrounding of orality (Frye 176). The figure of Winter comes to dramatic life only after the conventionalities and borrowings of the poem's first stanza (explicated at length by Gleckner [Gleckner 72-3]) are interrupted by the narrator's observation that his song is being brutally ignored. A Winter that can actually hear (or not hear) the narrative speaker is a living figure, not an abstraction, and in this line the poem ceases to be an exercise in neoclassical rhetoric, and instead springs to literary life as part of a small but dynamic mythic narrative. The subject matter of this orally-framed myth is, as we have seen, quintessentially Blakean. The natural world becomes a symbol of a deeper, truer spiritual world whose most basic elements are the opposed principles embodied in the physical changes of the seasons.

Origin of the Psychological Approach to Blake's Orality

These early works demonstrate some of the exciting possibilities of the study of orality in Blake, but critics who have recognized that orality is a significant feature of Blake's poetry have generally favoured psychological or theoretical interpretations over the more traditional symbolic or thematic readings pursued above. An example of this approach may be found in the earliest treatment of the subject, that found in *Fearful Symmetry*, where Frye briefly touches on the question of orality in Blake in the context of a discussion of the multimedia nature of his art. Noting that painting and printed (or hand-drawn) text are integrated in the illuminated books, Frye suggests that Blake also seeks to create a marriage of visual and *oral* art. "The two units of art, to Blake, are the audible unit, which is the word in poetry, and the visible unit, which is the image or outlined form," he writes (Frye 416). Blake's mythological names are the clearest demonstration of his commitment to orality: "Blake's Luvah contains the sound of 'love,' Urizen the sound of 'reason,' Urthona of 'north,' 'earth,' and 'throne'" (416). These names are "a poet's attempt to unite more closely the audible and visible units of his art" (416). Frye attempts to explicate the meaning of Blake's orality in psychological terms, defining orality strictly in terms of its nature as a physical sense, and interpreting its presence in Blake as the expression of a desire to create a form of art that would unify the reader-viewer's senses and alter his psyche through some kind of direct psychological reaction. As we will see, Frye's approach became the model for all succeeding investigations of this subject, but Frye himself was limited in his ability to pursue this approach by the sketchiness of his psychological theory of orality. His argument that the "combination of musical, pictorial and poetic characteristics in Blake's prophecies [makes] them unified visions of the three major arts" leads only to the conclusion that "[i]n all periods of his life, Blake moves towards undifferentiated art, art addressed not to a sense but to the mind that opens the senses" (Frye 417). What it might mean for art to *not* be addressed to a sense (it would seem that such art is meant to address *many* senses), or how the unification of the senses might trigger their "opening," is never explained. Lacking a developed theory of orality's place in the psyche, Frye is unable to do more than point to its presence in Blake's art as a manifestation of the artist's drive to unify and integrate wherever he finds division and fragmentation, and to hint at potentially dramatic consequences. Later critics who have followed Frye have not had this problem, for new theories of orality that would allow for the expansion of Frye's argument were not long in coming.

Modern Theories of Orality

According to the classicist Eric Havelock, the "modern discovery of orality" can be dated to the year 1963, a "watershed" year that saw the publication of a number of important books on this subject, the most notable being Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Claude Lévi-Strauss' *La Pensée Sauvage*, and Havelock's own *Preface to Plato* (Havelock, *Muse* 24). Each of these books, he writes, addresses dimensions of "the orality problem":

> What has it meant for societies and their cultures in the past to discard oral means of communication in favour of literate ones of various sorts? . . . What is precisely the relationship between the spoken word of today (or yesterday) and the written text? . . . Is oral communication the instrument of an oral state of mind, a type of consciousness quite different from the literate state of mind? (24)

Despite their recent rediscovery, these are some of the West's oldest theoretical questions, Havelock observes, addressed as early as Plato's *Phaedrus*. In this dialogue, Socrates and Phaedrus interrupt their wider discussion of love and literary quality to compare the relative merits of speaking and writing. Socrates recounts a legend that writing was created by the Egyptian god Theuth, who gave the art to the king Thamus in the belief that it "will make the people of Egypt wiser and give them better memories" (Plato 157). Thamus, however, contends that writing is a dangerous technology with two pernicious effects. First, it will destroy the memory of those who come to rely on its power to store language. Second, it will encourage a superficial approach to learning in which education is equated with the acquisition of information. This type of learning, Thamus argues, will displace the more profound education that comes from reflection and recollection. Those educated by books "will . . . seem to know much, while for the most part, they know nothing; and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows" (157). This latter effect will occur because writing removes language from its natural place as part of an immediate human context. Divided from their origin by physical space and time, written words "seem to talk as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say . . . they go on saying the same thing forever" (158). They are like the creations of the painter, for "when you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence" (158). In this silence, the reader is free to interpret the writer's words according to his own prejudices without fear of correction. In contrast, dialectical orality (of the sort Socrates himself practiced) is a responsive, flexible mode of communication in which each participant is continually questioning and being questioned. This is the true method of acquiring knowledge, Socrates argues, superior even to the rhetorical speech-making orality of the Sophists, which mimics writing in its own one-way flow of language. In short, the utility and power of the written word lie in its ability to act as an external memory, but in performing this service, writing undermines the link between language and experience by placing language in an external space, transforming it from a concrete element of an immediate personal encounter into an inanimate, impersonal abstraction.

Largely passed over for centuries, this argument was the object of renewed attention in the 1960's in the wake of Milman Parry's widely influential demonstration of the oral nature of the Homeric poems. Parry's studies showed that "virtually every distinctive feature of Homeric poetry is due to the economy enforced on it by oral methods of composition" (Ong, *Orality* 21). As a single example, Parry recognized that Homeric epithets (such as "clever Odysseus" or "rosy-fingered Dawn") were in fact syllabically measured building blocks out of which an oral bard could improvise a metrically regular performance of a familiar story. These insights led Parry to conclude that traditional oral poetry functions according to principles very different from those that shape the verbal art of literate cultures. The requirements of orality (in particular, the necessity that texts be easy to memorize) shape the compositional process from beginning to end, embedding formulaic and repetitive elements into poetry at every level.[1] Parry and his assistant Albert B. Lord travelled through Yugoslavia in the 1930s, recording and studying Serbo-Croatian oral bards, or *guslari,* in search of contemporary evidence to confirm their thesis.[1] Their conclusion, that the texts that structure oral cultures are themselves structured by the conditions of primary orality, proved inspirational to anthropologists, psychologists, and even literary historians, and became the basis of the interdisciplinary field of modern orality-literacy studies. Of most interest in the present case, however, are the intellectual developments that took place in the realm of literary and cultural history, where certain scholars began arguing that Parry's thesis could be the solution to a host of difficult problems. If orality itself determined the distinctive features of the oral text, and the oral text (in all its varying forms) was the fabric of oral culture, it stood to reason that *media themselves* were the condition of certain types of culture, and it made sense to try to explain *all* of the differences between oral and literate culture as necessary consequences of the prevalence of their dominant media.

---

[1] Walter J. Ong has argued that the controlling aesthetic of literate art (which reaches its zenith in Romanticism, according to Ong) is originality, not repetition, and that this becomes more true as literacy becomes more widely and thoroughly interiorized (Ong, *Orality* 22-23).

This argument became the foundation of the general theory of orality and literacy that Havelock describes as having emerged during the 1960's, and which in the world of literary studies is most closely associated with Marshall McLuhan and Walter J. Ong. This general theory (summarized and popularized most notably in Ong's *Orality and Literacy*: *The Technologizing of the Word* [1982]) is actually a set of related theories which share a basis in the above argument. In its broadest outlines, the general theory of orality may be divided into two parts: a set of functional or anthropological theories, and a set of psychological theories. The functional theories attempt to explain personal and social changes in terms of the behavioural consequences of using certain media, while the psychological theories account for these changes as the product of direct effects of media on the mind.

---

[1] See Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales* (1960), which applies the lessons learned from the Yugoslav studies to a comparison of epics in ancient and Byzantine Greek, Old English and Old French.

Functional Theories of Media Effects

Plato's theory of orality and literacy is of the functional kind, attributing change to behaviours encouraged or discouraged by the use of certain media. Writing, for example, makes us forgetful by eliminating the need for individuals to train and develop their memories. Even worse, writing allows us to interpret the words of others according to our pre-existing intellectual prejudices without fear of contradiction. It thereby encourages shallow pedantry and the proliferation of error. The primary importance of *orality*, then, is that it locates the act of communication in a living social context which forces us to develop our innate human capabilities while acting as a check on our intellectual weaknesses. Plato attacks writing because it enables what he considers to be destructive *behaviours* like solitary reading and dependence on books instead of memory. Media thus affect us only indirectly by enabling and encouraging certain behaviours which may themselves have social or psychological effects (such as ignorance and forgetfulness).

Much of modern orality-literacy theory consists of the elaboration of this approach to account for the complete range of new behaviours and effects enabled by literacy (and later by print). Ong suggests that these behaviours encompass almost all of what we think of as civilization:

> Writing has made possible the vast evolution of consciousness that marks the later stages of human history. . . . Writing has made possible not only development of science and technology as well as of the humanities (that is, the study of language, history, philosophy, theology, and other subjects having to do with man as a self-conscious being and thus with the life of the mind and with freedom); it has also made possible the complex relationships between large groups of people which a fully populated planet demands. (Ong, *Interfaces* 256)

The primary mechanism of these changes is that outlined by Plato: writing acts as an external, permanent memory. As we have seen, Plato condemns this function of literacy, but Ong and others have argued that it is crucial to the development of analytic reasoning. The ability to store practically unlimited amounts of knowledge on paper (or papyrus or vellum) liberates the mind from the necessity of encoding valuable information in formulaic structures adapted for easy memorization. In an oral culture, "[s]erious thought is intertwined with memory systems" like rhythm, narrative, and repetition (Ong, *Orality* 36). "Once a formulary structure has crystallized, it had best be kept intact," writes Ong, for "[w]ithout a writing system, breaking up thought - that is, analysis - is a high-risk procedure" (38). Writing thus allows the thinker to break up traditional oral formulae without fear of losing their informational content. It is therefore a precondition of philosophic and scientific thinking, Ong contends, and instrumental in enabling societies to move beyond the rigid intellectual conservatism that characterizes formula-dependent oral culture. Anthropologist Jack Goody has pushed this argument even further, arguing that logical thinking itself is "a function of writing, since it was the setting down of speech that enabled man clearly to separate words, to manipulate their order and to develop syllogistic forms of reasoning" (Goody 11). Summarizing the functional approach to orality-literacy theory, Goody states that "writing is no mere phonograph recording of speech . . . it encourages special forms of linguistic activity associated with developments in particular kinds of problem-raising and problem-solving" (162).

Psychological Theories of Media Effects

While functional theories seem to have potentially tremendous explanatory power, their impact on Blake studies has been negligible. Scholars in this field have been more interested in a related set of theories that extrapolate from the behavioural model of orality and literacy to postulate the existence of even more profound media effects. Because these psychological theories have become the foundation of the few post-Frye studies of orality in Blake, it will be worthwhile to consider them in some detail before examining their critical application.

According to Ong, the seeds of the psychological approach to media may again be found in Plato, whose functional argument may be reduced to the psychological contention that writing is "the reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space, the separation of the word from the living present" (Ong, *Orality* 82). Implied in this summary are a number of statements about the psychology of sense perception. First, Ong claims that the technology of writing converts language from an auditory medium into a visible medium. The listener or speaker experiences language with his ears, while the reader does so with his eyes. This is important, because sound is by nature energetic, vital, in constant flux. Inanimate visible objects (like written words) are static and deathlike in comparison. These effects combine to diminish the overall sensory impact of written language, and the process is exacerbated by the fact that the written word is fully realized only when reconstructed as a ghost of oral sound in the abstract space of the mind. As we become more accustomed to experiencing language in writing rather than speech, (or in Ong's words, as literacy is more deeply "interiorized" [81]), our psychological make-up changes. We experience an "interior transformatio[n] of consciousness" that "alienat[es] us from a natural millieu" (82). That is to say, we become increasingly focused on the visual and abstract and increasingly distanced from the oral-aural and concrete. We turn away from the "warm, personally interactive lifeworld" of orality and towards the implicitly cold, non-interactive world of abstraction (80).

Advocates of this approach to media studies argue that the psychological changes induced by literacy have had world-changing consequences. An example of such an argument is Havelock's controversial thesis that the invention of the fully phonetic alphabet triggered the explosion of intellectual activity in fifth-century Greece, and is therefore responsible for the birth of Western philosophy and science. As Havelock points out, the Greek alphabet was derived from earlier Semitic scripts, but the Greeks are the first people known to have added *vowels* to an alphabetic script. In doing so, he argues, they created the first alphabet to encompass the total range of vocalizations possible in their language in visual form. The phonetic alphabet, unlike earlier consonantal or pictographic scripts, aims to do more than simply supplement the oral word with a picture or schematized representation of certain of its phonetic elements; it seeks to *capture* the oral word, to convert it completely into visible information. No previous form of writing had so thoroughly absorbed and replaced its oral source. "An act of vision was offered in place of an act of hearing as the means of communication," writes Havelock (Havelock, *Muse* 100). The change from orality to fully alphabetic literacy "became the means of introducing a new state of mind - the alphabetic mind" (Havelock, *Revolution* 7). This new state of mind is partly a product of functional or behavioural processes, for now "a visible artifact was preservable without recourse to memory" (8). But Havelock goes further to claim special status for the fully phonetic alphabet, for "the limitations of prealphabetic scripts prevented their content from ever reaching that standard of sophistication characteristic of Greek and post-Greek cultures" (7). The Greek alphabet removes the word from its oral context more thoroughly than any previous script, argues Havelock. As Ong remarks, "the alphabet operates more directly on sound *as* sound than other scripts, reducing sound directly to spatial equivalents" (Ong, *Orality* 91). This absorption of sound by sight pushes the reader inward into the abstract contemplation of concepts now *visualized* as objects in space. Greek philosophy thus originates in the phonetic alphabet's ability to distance language from immediate situational contexts. "A revolution was underway both psychological and epistemological," Havelock writes (Havelock, *Revolution* 87). "The Greeks did not just invent an alphabet," he concludes, "they invented literacy and the literate basis of modern thought" (82).

The essence of this model of media is that it postulates that media affect the individual psyche directly, rather than indirectly through behavioural changes. It achieves its most comprehensive form in the work of Marshall McLuhan, who extrapolates from the studies of Parry and Lord[1] to propose a complete theory of cultural and psychological change. The foundation of McLuhan's work is the idea that "cultural ecology has a reasonably stable base in the human sensorium, and that any extension of the sensorium by technological dilation has a quite appreciable effect in setting up new ratios or proportions among all the senses" (McLuhan, *Gutenberg* 48). That is to say, culture changes as the ratio of the senses changes (as sight takes precedence over sound, for example), and this ratio varies as new media technologies extend and amplify various senses. "Media are artificial extensions of sensory existence," writes McLuhan, "each an externalized species of the inner genus sensation" (McLuhan, *Counterblast* 116). Every improvement in communication involves a change in the way our senses are extended. Because our senses determine our experience of the world, alterations in the way we use them have ramifications in every area of life. "Any change in the means of communication produces a chain of revolutionary consequences at every level of culture and politics," writes McLuhan (116).

From this perspective, both oral and written language must be understood as forms of technology, and to move from reliance on one to the other alters the ratio of the senses in important ways. This is particularly true in the case of a shift from orality to literacy, for McLuhan believes that oral language is the most comprehensive of media technologies. To speak (and to listen to speech) is to participate in a media environment in which all of the senses are integral. The oral speaker hears his own words and the replies of his audience, while his kinesthetic senses modulate his breathing and mouth movements. Simultaneously, he feels his own gestures and the vibrations of voice in the head, throat and chest, and sees his audience's response in their body language. He may even gain important situational information from smell or taste. Orality is thus "an orchestral harmony of touch, taste, sight and sound" (117), a sensory "synaesthesia" (McLuhan, *Gutenberg* 314) which embodies language in its most primal and natural state. "For language itself," says McLuhan, "is an acoustic medium which incorporates gesture and all the various combinations of sensuous experience in a single medium of sound" (McLuhan, *Counterblast* 131).

---

[1] McLuhan describes his own work as an extension of that of Parry and Lord, and *The Gutenberg Galaxy* as "in many respects complementary to *The Singer of Tales*" (McLuhan, *Gutenberg* 9).

The nature of writing, on the other hand, is to convert the "many-layered concert" of orality into a one-dimensional visual experience (114). "Writing was a visualizing of the acoustic which split off or abstracted one aspect of speech," McLuhan writes (131). This aspect is, of course, the purely aural element of the oral word. In the written word, sound is encased in a visual container which is offered as a replacement for the multidimensional sensory experience of orality. When we read, sight therefore takes precedence over sound, and the latter is reduced to an abstract ghost, the "inner speech" of the silently read word (117). The obvious technological advantages of literacy are thus paid for by the impoverishment of our sensory experience. "Literate man experiences an inner psychic withdrawal from his external senses which gives him a heavy psychic and social limp," says McLuhan (117). His other senses dimmed by the visual glare from the written page, literate man begins to organize his consciousness according to the logic of the one sense that remains fully open to him. The result is a changed experience of the world which McLuhan describes as a move from the "acoustic space" of primitive orality to the enclosed, visual, geometrical space of literacy (13).

These two psychological "spaces" represent the application of McLuhan's theory of sense ratios to the dualistic (non-rational vs. rational) theory of orality and literacy espoused by Havelock and Ong. Because the ear hears in all directions and its awareness penetrates all but the thickest barriers, the world as it is experienced by the non-literate is "boundless, directionless, horizonless" (13). Since abstract thinking is a *visual* process, according to McLuhan, acoustic space is also free of systematic rationality and linear, syllogistic logic. Acoustic space is therefore "the world of emotion" and of "primordial intuition" (13), a "magically resonating world of simultaneous relations" (McLuhan, *Gutenberg* 22). Visual space, on the other hand, reflects the characteristics and limitations of sight. Since the eye sees in one direction only and its view is easily obstructed by obstacles, visual space is a world of boundaries, of definition, of direction (up, down, left, right), of fixity and limitation, and it generates ideologies that reflect these qualities. As McLuhan argues, "Euclidean space . . . is a product of literacy and is unknown to pre-literate or archaic man" (214), as are the philosophies of "Descartes and Newton, who had wholly abstracted the visual sense from the interaction of the other senses" (68). Literacy alters the ratio of the senses in favour of sight, and therefore in favour of rationality, fixity, linearity and limitation.

These psychological theories culminate in the contention that a "Great Cognitive Divide" exists between the oral and literate minds (Scribner and Cole 6). As McLuhan phrases it:

> a child in any Western [i.e. literate] millieu is surrounded by an abstract explicit visual technology of uniform time and uniform continuous space in which

> "cause" is efficient and sequential, and things move and happen on single planes and in successive order. But the African [i.e. non-literate] child lives in the implicit, magical world of the resonant oral word. (McLuhan, *Gutenberg* 19)

Writers wishing to demonstrate the breadth of this divide often turn to the work of Soviet anthropologist A.R. Luria. Luria's investigations of the cognitive skills of illiterate farmers in Soviet Central Asia are frequently cited by orality theorists, and seem to confirm the theory's most extreme conclusions. Designed to test the theories of Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist who extended Marxist theories of the transformative power of human labour to include *signs* as instruments of work, Luria's studies seem to confirm Vygotsky's hypothesis that literacy is a key formative influence in developing higher cognitive skills. For example, when asked by Luria to group the similar words in the series, "hammer, saw, log, hatchet," a 25-year-old illiterate peasant replied, "They're all alike. The saw will saw the log and the hatchet will chop it into small pieces. If one of these has to go, I'd throw out the hatchet. It doesn't do as good a job as the saw" (qtd. in Ong, *Orality* 51). Another man, asked to explain what a tree is, replied, "Why should I? Everyone knows what a tree is. They don't need me telling them" (53). Such answers were once regarded by literate scholars as evidence of the backwardness or stupidity of the savage mind, but have been reinterpreted by modern theoreticians of orality as expressions of the concrete, situational consciousness that inhabits acoustic space. Ong, for example, argues that these answers reflect a natural state of consciousness in direct and intimate contact with "the person-to-person human lifeworld" where abstract reasoning does not apply (53). Emphasizing this point, Ong goes so far as to define literate human beings as "beings whose thought processes do not grow out of simply natural powers, but out of those powers as structured, directly or indirectly, by the power of writing" (Ong, *Orality* 78). "More than any other single invention," writes Ong, "writing has restructured consciousness" (78).

Orality Theory and Blake Studies

The psychological theory of orality seems ideally suited for application to Blake. Not only does Blake saturate his work with oral imagery, he also energetically attacks systematic reasoning and abstraction, "Abstract Philosophy" which "war[s] in enmity against Imagination" (E 148). As the critical work of T.R. Frosch demonstrates, there are also suggestive parallels between Blake's frequent violations of Newtonian spatial and temporal logic and McLuhan's notions of acoustic space. Indeed, Frosch's study of orality in Blake may be described as a one-to-one mapping of McLuhan's psychological theory of media effects to the poetry of Blake. Beginning with the observations that Blake's poetic world is "largely one of sounds and voices," and that "his early lyric poetry is grounded in the traditional oral modes of song and ballad" (Frosch 11), Frosch reiterates Frye's argument that the poetry "reveals a strikingly aural basis," and is "concerned . . . with bringing qualities of the spoken voice back into poetry and thereby re-establishing verse as a specifically auditory art form" (110). Armed with McLuhan (Frosch does not cite him in the body of his argument, but mentions him as an influence in his preface [11]), Frosch is able to develop a precise theory of the *meaning* of orality in Blake, arguing that the poet's goal is to "develo[p] an expressive mode organized according to the ways in which the ear, in radical contrast to the eye, structures information" (110-11). Readers of Blake are familiar with the difficulties of visualizing many of his multi-perspectival scenes (Book Two of *Milton*, in which the protagonist exists in five separate locations at the same moment, may serve as an example here), but Frosch argues that these difficulties stem precisely from our attempt to *visualize* them (113). We should read with the ear, not the eye, for Blake's intent is to recreate poetically the non-linear, borderless world of acoustic space. The poems do not reflect a fixed, spatially organized visual perspective, but "a field of unframed and ungrounded interrelations" (113) strongly reminiscent of McLuhan's "magical world of simultaneous relations." Although he does not use these exact words, Frosch contends that the purpose of this oral poetics is the alteration of the reader's sense ratios, "using the ear to oppose the tyranny of the eye" (122), for "the ear is the most powerful agency for breaking the spell of the visual" (105). The result will be "an energetic interplay of equals" (122), a "synaesthesia" that will restore a natural harmony of the senses (123). Frosch's conclusion, then, is drawn almost verbatim from the closing pages of *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* where McLuhan describes Blake's poetry as an attempt to recreate in written form the natural "interplay or synaesthesia" of senses that characterizes primal acoustic space (McLuhan, *Gutenberg* 314).[1]

Robert Essick's discussion of Blake's orality is similarly grounded in McLuhanesque psychological models of media effects. His understanding of orality seems to derive from both Frosch (his discussion is "indebted to Frosch's cogent observations" [Essick, *Language* 173]) and from later writings by Walter Ong that draw on what Ong calls McLuhan's "startling insights" (Ong, *Orality* 29). Essick applies this understanding in the course of a larger study of Blake's theories of language and art. For Essick, the latter is defined most clearly by Blake's belief that the acts of artistic conception and execution cannot be divided, as was commonly believed in his day.[1] Thus Essick enters into the "pursuit of continuities in Blake's methods of language production," which leads him first to reiterate Frye's argument that the illuminated book is a marriage of conventional printing and handwriting (Essick, *Language* 171). But "there is one further, difficult step to be taken" (171). This step is the suggestion that Blake marries *orality* with handwriting, thereby bringing together the oral, written, and printed words (and the visual art of painting) in a single unified process of conception-execution. The primary significance of Blake's "oral writing" is that it "unit[es] ear and hand as completely as Blake the engraver joined eye and hand" (179-80). This is an elaboration of Frye's case that Blake's intent was the creation of "undifferentiated art," but Essick grounds the argument more solidly in Blake's conception-execution theory. Essick is primarily concerned to show that Blake's commitment to orality is a single aspect of a larger program of psychological surrender to media (or as Essick phrases it, Blake's adoption of media as his Muses). For Essick, media are *forces* which act directly on the artist's mind, shaping consciousness and giving direction to creativity. In the case of Blake's oral writing, "the poet allowed the medium to speak its own multifarious being and to do so he had to abnegate his independent will and become only one among many forces within an undivided production process" (189).[1] As in Frye and Frosch, the effect of this undivided production process is "synaesthesia" (182), although Essick sides with Frye in seeing its value as residing in a unification, rather than a reorganization, of the senses. Essick follows Frosch, however, in appealing directly to the McLuhan-Ong theory of nonlinear oral consciousness in his speculations that Blake's orality manifests itself in his violations of spatial and temporal logic. Citing Ong's claim that "the oral-aural individual . . . does not find himself simply situated somewhere in neutral, visual-tactile Copernican space," Essick notes that "[a]t the very least such speculations hint at an underlying compatibility between Blake's methods of creating poems and his critique of objective space and time and their Newtonian quantifications" (181). While Essick does not pursue this line of thought, his willingness to entertain it suggests he is not averse to its theoretical premises.

---

[1] McLuhan's influential remarks on Blake are treated in detail later in this chapter.

---

[1] Blake's belief in the unity of conception and execution is discussed in its historical context in Chapter III of this dissertation.

The most recent study of orality in Blake, that of John B. Pierce, also draws heavily on Ong for its conception of orality and literacy. As Pierce explains, his understanding of these media is structured by the idea that they represent differing "conceptual fields" (Pierce 450). For Pierce, the most interesting of the differences between these fields is that writing has the power "to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience," in the words of Ong (qtd. in Pierce 458). The idea that writing *per se* creates a new kind of mental space (or "conceptual field") is, as we have seen, is a primary tenet of the psychological model of media effects. Pierce's argument is thus in many ways a development of those of Frosch and Essick, recognizing both Blake's profound orality and the similarities between his poetic universe and oral consciousness as theorized by modern scholars. Although Pierce's primary concern is Blake's understanding of textuality (in particular, the reception of written texts) and not his psychology of sense perception, he uses the psychological model of orality and literacy to argue that Blake theorizes (through symbolism) not a unification, but a harmonization of these apparently antagonistic conceptual fields. This harmonization is effected by the re-imagining of orality and literacy as Blakean contraries (notably in the figure of Ololon [463-66]) without which there is no progression in the direction of a complete experience of "the complex and polyvalent dimensions of language as a whole" (451). The result is a synaesthetic text, Frye's "undifferentiated art" once more, but with "transformative" and "liberating" powers to break the rational, linear consciousness of literacy (469). Pierce also argues a variant of Frosch's and Essick's case that Blake's narratological complexities deconstruct spatial and temporal linearity, although Pierce's explication of linearity is apparently derived not from McLuhan or Ong, but from Derrida's contention that the written page shapes Western notions of history as a "linear scheme of unfolding of presence" (qtd. in Pierce 468). Even so, Pierce's argument that the written page is able to transfer its own linearity directly to the reader's mind by some unstated process is a clear expression of the McLuhan-Ong theory of psychological media effects, and may be indirectly derived from Ong, whom Pierce quotes extensively elsewhere in the paper.

---

[1] Compare with McLuhan's description of oral artistry as "self-effacement" and "a surrender to process" (McLuhan, *Counterblast* 138).

Limitations of the Psychological Model

The purpose of the preceding argument has been to show that existing attempts to study orality in Blake are founded on a closely related set of theories that postulate that media can alter consciousness directly. Perhaps because these theories originate outside their fields of expertise, literary scholars have tended to accept them without serious question. Encompassing as they do questions of sense perception, spatial awareness, rationality, fixity, writing and speech, they seem particularly appropriate for the study of Blake. Indeed, they almost seem *made* for the study of Blake. This may not be a coincidence, for McLuhan, one of the major figures in orality theory (especially through his influence on Ong[1]), states in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* that one of his own major influences is none other than Blake. Blake's unorthodox narratological structures are "the explication and justification" for the "mosaic pattern" of McLuhan's own notoriously nonlinear books, he writes (McLuhan *Gutenberg* 314). We might say, in fact, that McLuhan is one of the most important theorists of Blake's orality, for he claims that Blake's view of orality (and of media in general) is identical to his own. "Blake makes quite explicit that when sense ratios change, men change," he writes (314), and his poetry is a bid to return to the wholeness of acoustic space, "the mode of simultaneous awareness of a complex group of causes and effects" (315). Characteristically, McLuhan does not provide a linear explanation of how he reached these conclusions, but it seems evident that he regards Blake as a predecessor whose ideas anticipate his own. "Determined as he was to explain the causes and effects of psychic change, both personal and social, [Blake] arrived long ago at the theme of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*," he writes (314).

---

[1] The question of influence among the most influential advocates of the psychological theory of media effects is difficult to clarify. Considering, however, that McLuhan cites Ong's early discussions of Peter Ramus only to explicate the *functional* influence of printing technology on ideas of intellectual method (McLuhan, *Gutenberg* 176), while Ong cites McLuhan primarily to praise his insight into the psychology of orality (Ong, *Orality* 29), I postulate that Ong derives the more extreme psychological elements of his theory largely from McLuhan. In any case, Ong's writings on Ramus are devoid of the McLuhanesque notions of consciousness and space that appear in his later work (see Ong, *Romance* 142-189).

There is a danger of tautology, then, in applying McLuhanesque media theories to Blake, since it is not clear to what degree these theories may be *derived* from McLuhan's reading of Blake – or indeed, from his misreading of Blake. There is good reason to be suspicious of McLuhan's claim to find in *Jerusalem* a precursor to his own theoretical work. He suggests, for example, that Blake's idea of "ratio" is equivalent to his own notion of "sense ratio." Thus the Reasoning Spectre's division from Imagination to form a "Ratio of the Things of Memory" (E 229) is a symbolic representation of the "outer[ing]" of the visual sense in the technology of writing (McLuhan, *Gutenberg* 314). Imagination itself is "that ratio among the perceptions and faculties which exists when they are not embedded or outered in material technologies" (314). This interpretation of the Blakean idea of "ratio" is surely wrong, for Blake uses the word only to refer to the internal workings of the *ratio*nal mind. This is most clear in early tracts like *There is No Natural Religion*. For Blake, reason is nothing more than "the ratio of all we have already known," the totality of the relationships among the ideas in our minds (E 2). This ratio is inherently static, "unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again," and does not alter until "the Poetic or Prophetic character" creates new ideas that disturb the existing ratio and force it to settle into a new equilibrium (E 3). While Blake considers the "Philosophy of the Five Senses" (E 68) to be an element of this ratio (indeed, it is one of the most important parts of the ratio of fallen Reason), he never speaks of the senses *themselves* as a ratio. The "Ratio of the Things of Memory" is composed only of *ideas* generated over time by the Poetic Genius, and these ideas are by no means derived entirely from sense perceptions. Indeed, to argue that Blake's vision of Imagination is ultimately a philosophy of the harmonious relationship of the bodily senses is to deny Blake's own assertion that "Mans perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception. he perceives more than sense (tho' ever so acute) can discover" (E 2). McLuhan's psychology of media locks "Imagination, the Divine Body" (E 229) within the very "Philosophy of the Five Senses" that Blake abhors. It is by no means certain, then, that McLuhan's imitation of Blake's nonlinear style reflects the artistic intention of its model, or that the presence of Blakean notions of nonlinearity and spatial disruption in McLuhan's theory of orality is more than an elaborate misunderstanding. We should be wary of mapping these ideas back on to Blake without carefully considering the degree to which McLuhan may have associated them with other ideas that may have no parallel in Blake.

Another, more important reason to be cautious about psychological theories of media is that in the past decade they have lost credibility in their native disciplines. Anthropologists and ethnologists have been particularly critical of the division of humanity into two mutually uncomprehending camps. Anthropologists Viv Edwards and Thomas J. Sienkiwicz, for example, have questioned claims that orality and literacy are mutually exclusive realms whose processes of artistic composition are entirely incompatible. "The literate observer," they write, "can find a safer path by thinking in terms of an oral-literate continuum which recognizes the skills of the oral performer and, at the same time, does not view the literate person as hopelessly cut off from oral skill" (Edwards and Sienkiwicz 6). They cite as an example the powerful oral performances of African-American preachers: "On the one hand, the preacher is steeped in the literate culture of the book, of the Bible; on the other hand the medium of the preacher's message is purely oral. . . . Despite, or because of literacy, the preacher has a foot in each world" (7). More recent studies of the Yugoslavian *guslars* whose performances continue to be foundational research material in the study of oral literature suggest that many of their traditional epics may be *literate* productions, preserved orally in the wake of a Turkish prohibition on the recording of indigenous tales (8). Ruth Finnegan summarizes the consensus of contemporary anthropologists in a passage cited with approval by Edwards and Sienkiwicz:

> Orality and literacy are not two separate and independent things; nor (to put it more concretely) are oral and written modes two mutually exclusive and opposed processes for representing and communicating information. On the contrary, they take diverse forms in differing cultures and periods, are used differently in different social contexts and insofar as they can be distinguished at all as separate modes rather than a continuum, they mutually interact and affect each other, and the relations between them are problematic rather than self-evident. (Finnegan 175)

Sweeping claims about qualitative differences between the oral and literate minds have also attracted the attention of research psychologists. Early studies, such as that of

Luria, seemed to confirm the psychological theory of media effects. More recent studies of schoolchildren in Senegal and Canada offer further evidence that literacy is an important factor in the development of abstract taxonomic and logical thinking in children (Scribner and Cole 10-11). Psychologists Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner, however, have argued that serious methodological weaknesses undermine the validity of these studies. "[C]omparisons were not made between schooled and unschooled children," they observe, "and schooling and literacy are not synonymous" (Scribner and Cole 13). To correct this situation, Scribner and Cole conducted what is now recognized as the most thorough, methodologically sound study of the psychological effects of literacy. The core of their work is a five-year study of the Vai people of Liberia. The Vai are ideally suited for this sort of experiment because of their unique cultural situation. A sizable percentage of the Vai are non-literate, and those who are literate may be trained in one (or more) of three very different forms of writing. The English phonetic alphabet is taught in the Liberian government school system, but the Arabic consonantal alphabet is also commonly taught by Islamic religious authorities. The Vai are unique among West African ethnic groups in that that they also have their own syllabic script. Because Vai script is not taught in schools of any kind, Scribner and Cole saw a unique opportunity to isolate literacy from formal schooling and different kinds of literacy from each other. Over a period of five years, they tested various literate and non-literate volunteers with a series of intellectual tasks usually considered crucial in defining the orality-literacy divide. Their results are the first solid experimental data we have on the psychology of literacy, and they indicate unambiguously that the psychological theories of media effects advocated by McLuhan, Havelock, and Ong are unfounded. As Scribner and Cole write, "it is clear from the evidence we reviewed that nonschooled literacy, as we found and tested it among the Vai, does not produce general cognitive effects as we have defined them" (132). In short, there were no significant cognitive effects associated with literacy once it was specifically separated from formal schooling and urban living, factors which proved to be much more accurate predictors of cognitive development than the acquisition of literacy. Certain effects differentiating those literate only in Vai script from their non-literate neighbors were observed, but these were minor, and limited to the acquisition of task-specific abilities associated with the social practices of Vai script literacy (for example, the ability to give directions to an unknown stranger, which seemed derived from the common practice of letter writing). These effects were *not* seen among those Vai who could read and write only Arabic, and whose use of literacy was often limited to the memorization and recitation of the Quran. Strikingly, these people demonstrated improvements in rote memorization skills over both non-literate and Vai-literate comrades (218-19). Scribner and Cole conclude that cognitive changes are associated with acquired skill in performing specific cognitive tasks, and *not* with literacy itself (although literacy may make those tasks possible). "Literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use," they write (236). As psychologist David Rubin has pointed out, the findings of Scribner and Cole are in harmony with the more general findings of cognitive psychology. "Cognitive expertise produces a set of skills for a particular task, not a general change in consciousness," writes Rubin (Rubin 313). Chessmasters, for example, develop the ability to quickly analyze and memorize arrangements of chess pieces, but these refined cognitive skills are not transferable to other intellectual tasks. The mind simply does not function in the manner postulated by the theories of orality that underlie our existing studies of Blake.

If we disregard these theories, how are we then to approach the question of orality in Blake? We may observe first that the *functional* model of orality and literacy remains intact, and is in fact confirmed by Scribner and Cole. Plato's contention that writing causes shallow pedantry remains untested, but other behaviours enabled by literacy (such as letter-writing) *do* cause cognitive change, even if this change is task-specific and not general. It remains possible to approach orality and literacy as "a set of socially organized practices" (Scribner and Cole 236), even if we must be careful about accepting conclusions about the consequences of these practices without experimental evidence. There also remains the anthropological-literary study of oral texts, the discipline which spawned the field of orality-literacy studies, and which tends to ignore problematic psychological generalizations in favour of examining specific features of oral and orally-derived texts (such as formula and structure) in order to understand them in the context of well-grounded knowledge about the cultures that created them. As John Foley writes, the value of such an approach is that it recognizes the peculiar responsibility of the reader of an oral-derived literary text "to view the text through a cognitive lens fundamentally similar to that employed in its making" (Foley, *Immanent Art* 54), or to put it another way, "to become the audience implied by that text" (55).

Foley is speaking primarily of texts which originate in nonliterate or newly literate cultures, but the historicizing approach of his discipline may be a useful corrective to the psychological speculations that have dominated the study of orality in Blake to this point. Indeed, to historicize an idea is a traditional method of *literate* literary studies, and as the brief examinations of *An Island in the Moon* and *Poetical Sketches* pursued earlier in this chapter demonstrate, such historical-thematic readings of orality in Blake show significant promise. Orality had a concrete meaning to Blake apart from any theories of sense perception, and as we saw in Pope and Thomson, it was a living idea in the literary tradition he aspired to join. Robert Essick hints at further possibilities when he suggests that Blake may have learned basic principles of oral formulaic composition from the contemporary work of Robert Lowth and John Pinkerton (Essick, *Language* 172). Indeed, these discussions of repetition and formula in oral poetry are only a small part of a large and influential body of eighteenth-century orality theory whose relationship to Blake has never been explored in any depth. In the chapters that follow, then, I pursue a historical approach to orality in Blake, referring to modern theories of orality where they seem relevant, but contextualizing them within parameters set by the historical discussion. What (I ask) are the characteristics of the audience implied by Blake's text? How might Blake have expected an eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century reader to respond to texts so patently infused with orality? Does he adapt elements of his age's orality theories to his own artistic purposes? And if so, how? The next chapter will begin to answer these questions by outlining and discussing the fundamentals of eighteenth-century theories of orality, and by investigating their presence in Blake's early poetry.

Chapter II

“The Childhood of the World and the Individual”: Orality Theory in the Eighteenth Century

This chapter explores theories of orality grounding eighteenth-century literary primitivism and examines their presence in Blake’s early poetry. These theories are traced to historical and linguistic hypotheses of prominent Greek and Roman writers, which were later elaborated by neoclassical scholars into a general theory of primitive language and culture. From the perspective of this chapter, the most significant of these classical hypotheses was the idea that poetry was the original mode of speech. Pursuit of the implications of this theory led writers like Thomas Blackwell, Robert Lowth, Adam Ferguson and Hugh Blair to conclude that poetic language (as defined by neoclassical aesthetic principles) develops naturally and spontaneously under the conditions of primitive orality, and that the decline of poetry (as measured by these same principles) was intimately related to the invention and spread of writing and printing. The chapter then turns to consider the imitation of primitivistic forms in Blake’s *Poetical Sketches*, postulating that these poems reflect an ambitious but only partially successful attempt to recover the aesthetically powerful voice of primitive orality and harness it for the purposes of Blake’s nascent artistic vision. A consideration of the place of orality in *Songs of Innocence* follows, which argues that the childlike voices and pastoral settings of these poems represent an attempt to recover the discourse of primitive orality and incorporate it into a philosophical and psychological exploration of the nature of innocence. At the same time, the “Introduction” to the *Songs* demonstrates Blake’s awareness of the problematic nature of the resurrection of primitive orality via the medium of writing, even as it expresses his faith that this project is both possible and worthwhile. The *Songs* therefore demonstrate that Blake had moved beyond the superficial imitation of primitivistic genres and styles, and that his artistic maturity coincides with his successful assimilation of theories of primitive orality into his philosophy and artistic vision.

Classical Roots of the Eighteenth-Century Conception of Orality

One of the curiosities of current discussions of orality is that they typically overlook the existence of culturally important eighteenth-century precursors. John Foley, for instance, a leading scholar of oral textuality, has stated bluntly that Parry's studies of Homer mark Western culture's first awareness of the oral derivation of its key texts, a statement that is far from accurate (Foley, *Tradition* 1). As Robert Essick points out, "The original oral nature of most ancient poetry, Biblical and Classical, became a commonplace among its students by the second half of the eighteenth century" (Essick, *Language* 172). The degree to which this was true is suggested by the fact that Thomas Blackwell, one of the era's most influential theorists of ancient literature,[1] simply assumes that the readers of his *Enquiry Into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1736) are aware that Homer was an oral poet ("a *stroling Bard*" [Blackwell 5]), and makes no serious attempt to prove a point so fundamental to his thesis. This blithe handling of what would become (after the publication of F.A. Wolf's *Prolegomena ad Homerum* in 1795, and especially after Wolf's death in 1824) the next century's agonizing "Homeric question" was a product of the eighteenth century's generally uncritical reception of the Greek and Roman classics. For Blackwell, accounts of the Homeric world in the writings of Herodotus, Plutarch, Pliny and Strabo were simply authoritative history. To support his argument that the Homeric poems were orally composed and performed, that the poet was "*a wandering indigent Bard*" (105) living in a period when "*Letters* were . . . but little known" (82), Blackwell merely refers his reader to appropriate references in the classical authors (Blackwell 37-44; 80-103). The same procedure would be followed by Robert Lowth in his widely influential *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (Latin, 1753; English trans., 1787), which make use of the same ancient sources. Lowth's argument that the Old Testament originated as oral verse is conducted largely by analogy with ancient Greece, for having noted that the ancient Greeks composed their earliest laws in the form of oral poems, Lowth concludes "[t]hat the case was the same among the Hebrews . . . appears highly probable" (Lowth 88; see also 81-87).

---

[1] M.H. Abrams observes that Blackwell, a professor at Marischall College in Aberdeen, "had probably been the teacher" of a number of important figures, including Hugh Blair, William Duff, Adam Ferguson, and Lord Monboddo (Abrams 81). Adam Smith was also a student of Blackwell, and the *Enquiry* cited as an authority on primitive culture by John Brown (Brown 52) and John Pinkerton (Pinkerton 4).

Such analogical reasoning was founded in the Enlightenment belief in a universal, rationally apprehendable human nature, and allowed sociological theories derived from classical sources to be extended to embrace all of humanity. The practices of ancient Greek orality (as reconstructed from the fragmentary information in classical sources) became the prototype of primitive society wherever it might be found, and the Homeric bard (with some modifications, especially in Lowth; see discussion in Chapter III) became the model for the primitive oral poet. We see this extension, for example, in

Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767). The orality of ancient poetry is a fixture of Ferguson's theory of historical development, and the foundation of this knowledge is again the classics. As Ferguson observes, "Priests, statesmen, and philosophers, in the first ages of Greece, delivered their instructions in poetry, and mixed with the dealers in music and heroic fable" (Ferguson 173). From these beginnings, Ferguson argues that primitive orality is a phase through which every human society passes. "[E]very tale among rude nations is repeated in verse, and is made to take the form of a song," he writes. "The early history of all nations is uniform in this particular" (173). Ferguson would cite "the American orator" as an example of a contemporary primitive bard (172), as would John Brown, author of *A Dissertation on the Rise, Union, and Power, the Progressions Separations, and Corruptions, of Poetry and Music* (1763). Brown makes extensive citations from Father Joseph François Lafitau's *Moeurs des Sauvages* (an account of the "Iroquois, Hurons, and some less considerable Tribes . . . who inhabit the northern Continent of America" [Brown 29]) in defense of his contention that "*Music, Dance, and Poem* . . . mov[e] Hand in Hand among the savage Tribes of every Climate" (28). Similarly, Hugh Blair observes in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) that the highly figurative style of the orally composed prophecies of the Bible was also a prominent feature of the "American Style," from which he gathers that "it plainly appears not to have been particular to any one region or climate; but to have been common to all nations, in certain periods of Society and Language" (Blair, *Lectures* 145). Blair's defence of Macpherson's Ossian poems is also important in extending the classically derived theory of primitive poetic orality to include native British traditions. Blair ranks Ossian alongside Homer as an oral bard, defending extended side-by-side comparisons with the Greek poet (Blair, *Dissertation* 97-112), and Macpherson himself claims for Ossian the legitimacy of classical tradition in his "Dissertation Concerning the Antiquity of the Poems of Ossian" (1762). Noting first the oral origin of the Ossian poems ("The use of letters was not known in the North of Europe till long after the institution of the bards" [Macpherson xii]), Macpherson observes that the ancient Scots "were not singular in this method of preserving the most precious monuments of their nation," for "[t]he ancient laws of the Greeks were couched in verse, and handed down by tradition" (xii). Similarly, John Pinkerton prefaces his *Scottish Tragic Ballads* (1781) by arguing that the old ballads were lingering traces of a once-flourishing native tradition of oral poetry, "the original language of men in the infant state of society in all countries" (ix-x).

Early Man and The Primacy of Poetry

As universalized as the idea of primitive orality became, it retained its roots in the Greek and Roman classics. These continued to be the principal sources of information about primitive society throughout the eighteenth century, and the primitivist aesthetic theories that grew out of these studies were built largely on ideas derived from these classical writers. One of the most important of these ideas was the "ancient Opinion, which appears so strange to us, That Poetry was before Prose," as Blackwell writes (Blackwell 38). Strabo, for instance, "a wise Man, and well acquainted with Antiquity," had claimed that the historians Cadmus and Hecataeus of Miletus "first took the Numbers, and the Measure from Speech, and reduced that to Prose which had always been Poetry before" (39). More importantly, Longinus, "the admired Judge of the Sublime," had contended "that the Ancients in their *ordinary Discourse* delivered themselves rather in Verse than Prose" (qtd. in Blackwell 39). Although typically not fond of citing his sources, Ferguson seems to draw on the same classical writers in reflecting that poetry, "a style apparently so difficult, and so far removed from ordinary use, should be almost as universally the first to attain its maturity" (Ferguson 173). John Brown also cites Strabo and Longinus, but includes the opinion of Plutarch that "In these early times, so general was the Inclination to Rythm [sic] and Numbers, that all Instruction was given in Verse" (Brown 50). For Brown, poetry actually represented the *second* stage of linguistic development, but this was only because the lowest savages could hardly be said to have language at all: "Their *Voice* is thrown out in *Howls* and *Roarings:* Their *Language* is like the *Gabbling of Geese*" (27). But "if we ascend a Step or two higher in the Scale of savage Life," this bestial babble turns to poetry, and "we shall find this *Chaos* of *Gesture, Voice*, and *Speech*, rising into an agreeable *Order* and *Proportion*. The mature Love of a *measured Melody*, which Time and Experience produce, throws the *Voice* into *Song*, the *Gesture* into *Dance*, the *Speech* into *Verse* or *Numbers*" (27).

Poetry and Memory

The historical priority of poetry thus connected it intimately with primitive orality. If poetry was the most primitive mode of discourse, as the ancients claimed, it was necessarily an innately *oral* mode, and its distinguishing features were natural consequences of the psychological and social conditions of primitive oral culture. Thus the theory that "poetry preceded prose" reflected a convergence of historical sociology and aesthetics, and it became common to explain cultural phenomena with aesthetic arguments and vice versa. This is apparent in the various eighteenth-century theories of the origin of poetic rhythm, meter, and formula. We saw in the preceding chapter that these features of poetry are considered by modern theorists to be primarily mnemonic aids, the necessary apparatus of preliterate culture. Eighteenth-century scholars of orality also recognized this, as we see in Blair, who writes that "before writing was invented, no other compositions, except songs or poems, could take such hold of the imagination and memory, as to be preserved by oral tradition, and handed down from one race to another" (Blair, *Dissertation* 5). In Blair's argument that formulaic compositions preserve knowledge by addressing both the *imagination* and the memory, however, we see evidence that the eighteenth-century theory of oral formula differed in an important way from our own. Theorists of this time believed that formulaic elements of poetry had a dual function, impressing their content on the memory of the oral primitive by speaking to both his ear and his heart. As Lowth writes,

> The only mode of instruction, indeed, adapted to human nature in an uncivilized state, when the knowledge of letters was very little, if at all diffused, must be that which is calculated to captivate the ear and the passions, which assists the memory, which is not to be delivered into the hand, but infused into the mind and heart. (Lowth 88)

Lowth here demonstrates his awareness that the products of oral culture are profoundly shaped by the needs of memory, but he does more than recognize the cognitive value of regularity, rhythm and repetition. For Lowth, formulaic and rhythmic structures are aspects of the *musicality* of poetry, which captivate not only the ear, but also the passions, influencing the memory through stimulation of strong emotion as well as through regularity and repetitiveness. "Whatever therefore deserved to be generally known and remembered," writes Lowth, "was . . . adorned with a jocund and captivating style" (81-2). Thomas Love Peacock would later agree with this theory of musicality's dual appeal in *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820). Beginning from the eighteenth-century commonplace that "all rude and uncivilized people express themselves in the manner which we call poetical," he states that "[t]he numerical modulation is at once useful as a help to memory, and pleasant to the ears of uncultured men, who are easily caught by sound" (4). For Peacock, excessive susceptibility to musical language is a sign of ignorance and barbarism, but most theorists of the age sided with Lowth and saw this quality as a sign of the heightened poetic sensibility of primitive man. Macpherson argues that this sensibility was augmented even by *limitations* imposed on language by the need for formula. According to Macpherson, the ear's need for regularity acts in oral societies as a beneficial stricture, forcing the bard to find "the most perfect harmony" of language in order to ensure the preservation of his work (Macpherson xii). The aural beauty and aesthetic integrity forced on the bard by the demands of memory help ensure the immortality of his work. "Each verse was so connected with those which preceded or followed it, that if one line had been remembered in a stanza, it was almost impossible to forget the rest," Macpherson writes (xii). His argument would be cited and expanded in

John Pinkerton's "Dissertation on the Oral Tradition of Poetry," the latter part of which aims to show "what arts the ancient bards employed to make their verses take such hold of the memory of their countrymen, as to be transmitted safe and entire without the aid of writing for many ages" (Pinkerton xvii). Pinkerton identifies a number of features of poetry that originate in the needs of memory: rhyme, alliteration, meter, and formula at the verbal and structural levels ("the frequent returns of the same sentences and descriptions expressed in the very same words" [Pinkerton xx], a feature also noted by Lowth [Lowth 101]). Echoing Lowth, he argues that these features "may be considered as affecting the passions and the ear" (xvii). Indeed, their most important quality is the effect such musicality has on the passions: "The harmony therefore of the old traditional songs possessing such influence over the passions . . . must have greatly recommended them to the remembrance" (xx). Like most theorists of this period, Pinkerton is well aware that oral societies depend on packaging knowledge in easily remembered ways, but he also insists that an important part of this process is the ability of the final product to make a powerful appeal to the emotions.

Passion and Mimesis

The emphasis on *passion* in the foregoing discussion reveals that we remain deep in the realm of neoclassicism. In spite of the reputation that neoclassical aesthetics later acquired for coldness, artificiality and rationality, they in fact gave primacy of place to the accurate imitation and arousal of energetic passion. As M.H. Abrams writes, "The assertion that eighteenth-century critics read by reason alone is gross calumny. Readers of no age have demanded more, or more violent, emotions from poetry" (Abrams 71). Aristotle had argued in the *Poetics* that "the awakening of emotions" was one of the primary goals of persuasive rhetoric in both prose and poetry (Aristotle 58), while an important stream of rhetorical theory running from the Greek sophists to the eighteenth-century elocutionist Thomas Sheridan had emphasized the importance of passion in oratory.[1] The rediscovery of Longinus in the late seventeenth century gave the classically inclined a further endorsement of artistic passion, for Longinus's view was that vehement passion was the most powerful source of the artistic sublime. "[N]othing contributes so much to the grand style as a noble emotion in the right setting," he writes, "when it forces its way to the surface in a gust of frenzy, and breathes a kind of divine inspiration into the speaker's words" (Longinus 109). John Dennis (or "Sir Tremendous Longinus," as he was nicknamed) was a notable advocate for the Longinian doctrine, arguing vociferously in his *Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701) that "Passion is the chief thing in Poetry," and defining poetry as "an imitation of Nature by a pathetick [that is, passionate] and numerous speech" (Dennis 471, 470). Dennis' remarks lead us to consider one other key criterion of neoclassical aesthetics: accurate mimesis of Nature in both its external and internal (emotional) manifestations. This principle was the foundation of Aristotle's aesthetics; all forms of poetry, he writes, "can in general be described as forms of imitation of representation," and types of poetry could best be sorted in terms of what they represent and how (Aristotle 31). Tracing the development and importance of this doctrine in the eighteenth century, Abrams notes particularly the influence of Plutarch and Horace, the former having popularized the saying of Simonides that "painting is mute poetry, and poetry a speaking picture," and the latter having created the famous phrase, *ut pictura poesis*. These summaries of the mimetic theory of art "became axioms in popular aesthetic wisdom" in the eighteenth century, writes Abrams (Abrams 33).[1] Believing as they did that poetry was the earliest form of speech, and having discovered the origins of "numerous speech" in the conditions of primitive orality, scholars studying the origin of poetry naturally turned to these conditions as the birthplace of the intensely passionate and mimetic kinds of language they recognized as poetic.

---

[1] See Chapter III for a fuller discussion of the rhetorical tradition in the context of Blake's primitivist theory of composition.

Their conclusion was that apart from mnemonic considerations, primitive oral discourse took the form of poetry because orality is innately passionate and mimetic, and was never more so than in the earliest times. In reaching this conclusion they were again aided by the ancient writers, in particular Lucretius, who rejected the theory that poetry preceded prose but whose theories of the origin of language were nevertheless enlisted (particularly by Blackwell) in support of the more common opinion of antiquity. Lucretius argued that human language has its beginning in the raw yelps and howls of primal emotion. Noting first that dogs, horses and birds express a variety of emotions through sound, he contends that human language is an extension of the same phenomenon, for "if different sensations compel creatures, dumb though they be, to utter different sounds, how much more natural is it that mortal men in those times should have been able to denote dissimilar things by many different words!" (Lucretius 75).

---

[1] See also the discussion in Abrams 30-46.

Blackwell favoured this model of language origin, following Lucretius in asserting that the first words were "taken wholly from rough Nature, and invented under some Passion, as Terror, Rage, or Want (which readily extort Sounds from Men)" (Blackwell 42). Since these first proto-words are "extorted" by external pressures, they are both mimetic and passionate, the perfectly appropriate and spontaneous expressions of the passion they represent. (A cry of terror, for example, is passionate to the highest degree, and a perfect proto-linguistic representation of the emotion of terror.) This theory of language origin enabled Blackwell to locate the perfected forms of two key neoclassical aesthetic criteria in the condition of primal orality. He was thus able to defend neoclassical tastes with sociological-historical arguments that ancient poetry was superior to modern poetry precisely *because* it was the product of oral society. Such justification was not a matter of minor concern. Blackwell's *Enquiry* investigates the nature of orality not as part of a disinterested examination of Homer's life and works, but in order to determine "By what Fate or Disposition of things it has happened, that None have equalled him in *Epic-Poetry* for two thousand seven hundred Years" (Blackwell 2). It never occurred to the ancients themselves to ask this question because of their belief that Homer was the "*Prophet* and *Interpreter* of the Gods" (3), but "the happy Change that has been since wrought upon the face of religious Affairs, leaves us at liberty to be of the contrary Opinion" (4). As a Christian, Blackwell seeks a naturalistic explanation of Homer's greatness, and finds it in the Lucretian model of the origins of language and the belief in the innate passion of oral composition, the capacity of spoken performance to inspire the poet with a near-divine madness:

> . . . while his Fancy was warming, and his Words flowing; when he had fully entered into the *Measure*, was struck with the *Rhythmus*, and seized with the *Sound*; like a Torrent, he wou'd fill up the Hollows of the Work; the boldest Metaphors and glowing Figures wou'd come rushing upon him, and cast a *Fire* and *Grace* into the Composition, which no Criticism can ever supply. (120)

The natural passion of oral performance spontaneously fills the primitive poet's mouth with the words that most perfectly express his feelings. These words are naturally mimetic and figurative, for "[t]he Passions of the human Mind, if truly awak'd, and kept up by Objects fitted to them, dictate a Language peculiar to themselves (44). This language "must be full of Metaphor; and that Metaphor of the boldest, daring, and most natural kind" (41-42). The practice of orality, then, is a crucial source of Homer's greatness, for as an expression of natural passion it naturally produces figurative language that mirrors both "the Passions of the human Mind" and the "Objects fitted to them."[1]

Hugh Blair would campaign on behalf of the Ossian poems with a slightly different argument. The poems seemed to Blair to be "genuine venerable monuments of remote antiquity," and therefore oral compositions of the Homeric stamp (Blair, *Dissertation* 36). "Both [Homer and Ossian] wrote in an early period of society; both are originals; both are distinguished by simplicity, sublimity, and fire," writes Blair (112).[1] The source of this sublimity is not a Blackwellian evolution of passionate yelping into numbered verse, but rather the tumultuous and vibrant nature of primitive life, where men "meet with many objects, to them new and strange; their wonder and surprize are frequently excited; and by the sudden changes of fortune occurring in their unsettled state of life, their passions are raised to the utmost" (2). The passion of ancient man naturally expresses itself in figurative language, partly because of the poverty of the primitive vocabulary, and partly because of "the influence of imagination and passion over the form of expression" (3). For Blair, the ancient figurative style is mimetic only in that it reflects the speaker's passions; unlike Blackwell, he does not see it as a natural reflection of the *objects* that stimulate that passion. Nevertheless, to the degree that "the soul of poetry" is "enthusiasm . . . vehemence and fire" (2), the spontaneous language of the oral primitive embodies these passions most of all because, as he wrote elsewhere, "spoken Language has a great superiority over written Language, in point of energy or force" (Blair, *Lectures* 172).

---

[1] Primitivistic theories of language typically argued that figuration was a uniquely mimetic form of speech, even a kind of verbal hieroglyphic. As Robert Essick observes, "According to primitivist theory, the tropes of poetry recall a linguistic condition only once removed from natural signs" (Essick, *Language* 71; see Essick's extended discussion of eighteenth-century theories of figuration in 71-77).

Robert Lowth's study of the Old Testament is motivated by a similar desire to augment his subject's literary credibility and prestige, for although the Bible was the undisputed centre of English culture, its apparent incompatibility with neoclassical aesthetics had become in this era something of an embarrassment. "The poetry of the Bible deviated conspicuously from many of the criteria inherited from Greek and Roman practice and precepts," writes Abrams, "but at the same time its divine origin and subject matter enforced the highest estimation of its excellence as literature" (Abrams 76). It is in this context that we must consider Lowth's *Lectures*, which may be seen as an attempt to legitimize the style of the Hebrew Bible by exposing its roots in primeval orality and its consequent adherence to neoclassical (and especially Longinian) aesthetic principles. "[I]t is not my intention to expound to the student of theology the oracles of divine truth," he writes, "but to recommend to the notice of the youth who is addicted to the politer sciences, and studious of the elegancies of composition, some of the first and choicest specimens of poetic taste" (Lowth 51). This taste was defined by the linguistic representation of passion, and Lowth's analogical case for the orality of Hebrew poetry allowed him to claim for the Old Testament the innate passion of ancient oral language. Because they belonged to the same preliterate stage of social development as the Homeric-era Greeks, the Hebrew poets participated in "that singular frenzy of poets, which the Greeks, ascribing to divine inspiration, distinguished by the appellation of *enthusiasm*" (79). The language prompted by this frenzy is spontaneously poetic, for "[t]he origin and first use of poetical language are undoubtedly to be traced to the vehement affections of the mind" (79). It is formulaic and metrical, because of the alliance of poetry and song in this age (80), but also spontaneously figurative and metaphoric, for in the Hebrew poets "there predominates a perpetual, I had almost said a continued use of the Metaphor" (121-2). As oral bards, the Hebrew poets could thus lay claim to "a style and expression directly prompted by nature itself," a style that exhibited "the true and express image of a mind violently agitated" (79).

---

[1] Although Blair speaks of these early poets as having *written* their poems, this usage is very common as late as Wordsworth, and by no means indicates that Blair believes they composed their poems in writing. It is common for theorists of the eighteenth century to refer to early poets whose works were preserved in writing as *writers*, even as they insist that their poetry was composed and performed orally. Blackwell, for instance, remarks of Homer and Hesiod that "a small Acquaintance with their Writings will convince any Man of Taste that they wrote from *Life*" (Blackwell 99). But he tells us they "wrote from life" precisely to show that they had no access to "such Learning as we acquire by Books" (103). Similarly, Blair describes Ossian alternately as a writer and singer in two consecutive sentences: "Ossian did not write, like modern poets, to please readers and critics. He sung from the love of poetry and song" (Blair, *Dissertation* 37). Such confused usage seems to be an early example of what Walter Ong calls "the relentless dominance of [literate] textuality in the scholarly mind," exemplified in "the fact that to this day no concepts have yet been formed for effectively . . . conceiving of oral art as such without reference, consciously or unconsciously, to writing" (Ong, *Orality* 10).

Lowth would find it necessary, however, to make slight adjustments to classically derived models of orality in order to use them to explicate the virtues of a Judeo-Christian text. In this respect he was preceded by John Dennis, who had already adapted Longinus to meet the needs of Christian poets. Dennis' case for the preeminence of passion in poetry culminates with the claim that the most extreme levels of passion are achieved in the throes of religious enthusiasm, and that therefore, "Religion, besides the Influence it will have upon the ordinary Passions, will be to a Poet, who has force and skill enough to make his advantage of it, a perpetual source of extraordinary Passion" (Dennis 465). Lowth would apply this principle to his analysis of ancient Hebrew poetry, which because of its religious orientation was "peculiarly appropriated to subjects the most solemn and sublime" (Lowth 42). At this point, however, a potential contradiction appears, for the Christian belief that poetic passion and language are stimulated by God seems at first glance incompatible with the classically derived theory that ancient poetry is the spontaneous oral expression of early man's response to Nature. Lowth, however, insists that this contradiction is only apparent. In the case of the ancient Hebrews, the "vehement affections of the mind" are aroused by natural perceptions of the divine *in* nature, rather than by mere perceptions of natural objects themselves (79). This is not quite a theory of immediate, indwelling inspiration in the manner of the age's enthusiastic nonconformist sects, but rather a Lockean view of inspiration as the emotion stimulated by rational contemplation of the natural wonders of God. "Is it not probable," he writes, "that the first effort of rude and unpolished verse would display itself in the praise of the

Creator, and flow almost involuntarily from the enraptured mind?" (38). The passions stimulated by "religious contemplations" are thus the source of the primeval Hebrew poetry, "than which the human mind can conceive nothing more elevated, more beautiful, or more elegant" (37).

"A Pleasing Simplicity, and Many Artless Graces"

In neoclassical aesthetics, passion and mimesis were united in the aesthetic virtue of *simplicity,* for the reason that simplicity was believed to be the style most clearly mimetic of passion. Joseph Addison was among the first to suggest the connection between orality and simplicity of style in his *Spectator* pieces on the literary merits of traditional ballads. *Spectator* No. 70 in particular praises the "the essential and inherent Perfection of Simplicity of Thought" of "The old Song of *Chevy Chase*" (Addison 318-19). Addison defends this popular oral ballad by demonstrating its adherence to the aesthetic principles exemplified in the classical epic. The most important of these principles is the accurate depiction of passion ("heroic Sentiments," in this case [230]) through a simple, clear style. As Albert B. Friedman writes, "Addison's major point is that the ballads illustrate that a poem can succeed, indeed best succeeds, by virtue of simplicity of style and thought" (Friedman 90-91). While these arguments aroused as much disagreement as approval (notably from Dennis, who believed Addison had mistaken vulgarity for simplicity [see Friedman 91-2]), they postulated another link between classical aesthetics and orality that later writers were to exploit more fully. As Friedman remarks, "those who adopted a more liberal attitude toward ancient and popular songs were vastly encouraged by Addison's stand" (109). One of these was Thomas Percy, who cites Addison in defence of his decision to publish his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. "I am sensible that many of these reliques of antiquity will require great allowances to be made for them," he writes in his Preface, "Yet they have, for the most part, a pleasing simplicity, and many artless graces, which in the opinion of no mean Critics have been thought to compensate for the want of higher beauties" (Percy xiv). First among these critics is Addison (xiv, *n.*), and Percy follows the earlier writer in attributing to simplicity the important quality of effectively communicating emotion. If the ballads do not dazzle the imagination, writes Percy, they "are frequently found to interest the heart" (xiv).

The simplicity of primitive poetry, like its other characteristics, was believed to be a natural consequence of its origin in the conditions of primitive orality. The oral primitive naturally expresses himself in simple language partly because his emotions are simple and uncomplicated, and partly because his society is not yet sufficiently sophisticated to encourage the stylistic self-doubt that leads to unnecessary complication. The argument is summarized most elegantly by Adam Ferguson, who writes that the primitive poet

> needs not be told by the critic, to recollect what another would have thought, or in what manner another would have expressed his conception. The simple passions, friendship, resentment, and love, are the movements of his own mind, and he has no occasion to copy. Simple and vehement in his conceptions and feelings, he knows no diversity of thought, or of style, to mislead or to exercise his judgement.

> He delivers the emotions of the heart, in words suggested by the heart, for he knows no other. (Ferguson 173)

In his own version of this argument, Blair would link these "simple and vehement conceptions and feelings" to the primitive's unmediated experience of nature. The savage lives "in the midst of solitary rural scenes," writes Blair, "where the beauties of nature are their chief entertainment" (2). The simple emotions stimulated by these beauties express themselves in the clear, direct language of primitive song. Thus the primitives "display themselves to one another without disguise: and converse and act in the uncovered simplicity of nature" (Blair, *Dissertation* 2).

No one would go farther than Blackwell, however, in tracing the stylistic characteristics of ancient poetry to the conditions of orality. Blackwell saw simplicity of style as one of the many by-products of the lifestyle of the wandering oral poet. He acknowledges that modern readers might think the restricted circumstances of primitive life unfavourable to the development of poetic skill. But the nomadic, largely rural existence of the "*stroling Bard*" (Blackwell 5) was actually an advantage, he argues, for "The *Order* of a Town, and the *Forms* brought into the common City-life, elude the Passions, and abate their Force by turning them upon little Objects" (117). Roaming in the wilds of Nature as he travelled between towns, the bard was free from the urban complications that dilute the passions with trivia and lead the mind into unpoetic sophistication. The bard was therefore free to study the natural and social worlds around him, to gain a broad knowledge of people and manners, "and in this respect was truly a *Citizen of the Universe*" (117). But more importantly, having been admitted to the residence of a patron, the bard was required to perform his poems orally, "[f]or his Poems were made to be *recited* or sung to a *Company*; and not read in private, or perused in a Book, which few were then capable of doing" (122). The innate passion of primitive oral speech was further stimulated by the convivial social atmosphere of live performance. Under these conditions, "[h]is Heart dilates, his Spirits flow, and if there is any *Vein of Humour* or Thought within him, it will certainly break loose, and be set a running" (124). But the presence of a living, responding audience acts as a corrective to the poet's flowing spirits, preventing them from overflowing into verbosity and obscurity, for "if he would succeed, he must entertain his wondering Audience in a simple, intelligible Stile," without "*fanciful Conceits* or profound Verses in an uncommon language" (120). Blackwell here follows Addison in arguing that the universality of orality and its accessibility to immediate listener response influence poetic style for the better, encouraging the depiction of simple sentiments in a natural manner. As Addison writes, "an ordinary Song or Ballad that is the Delight of the common People, cannot fail to please all such Readers as are not unqualified for the Entertainment by Affectation or Ignorance" (Addison 319). The reason is plain, "for it is impossible that any thing should be universally tasted and approved by a Multitude, tho' they are only the Rabble of a Nation, which hath not in it some particular Aptness to please and gratify the Mind of Man" (318). Human nature is the same in all reasonable creatures, he argues, and therefore the most popular style must reflect that nature most truly. Both Addison and Blackwell borrow from Nicolas Boileau's *Critical Reflections on Longinus* (1674) the anecdote of "*Moliere's old Woman*," citing it as an application of the same principle by a contemporary master. Blackwell thus concludes his discussion of bardic simplicity by noting that "the most approved Writer among the Moderns makes choice of a Circumstance for his Rule that *Homer* was obliged to regard in every Performance" (121).

Literacy and the Decline of Poetry

The example of Moliere seems to suggest the possibility that the greatness of the ancient poets could be revived if poets would return to oral contexts of composition, but neither Addison nor Blackwell would go this far. Indeed, it was much more common for eighteenth-century thinkers to view the condition of primitive orality as a lost poetic Golden Age, only partially recoverable in popular ballads or the contemporary writings of rural semi-primitives like the Thresher Poet, Stephen Duck, the Poetical Washerwoman, Mary Collier, or as Abrams remarks, "the one aspirant to make good," the Poetical Plowboy, Robert Burns (Abrams 105). In contrast to the simple and passionate poetry of the oral primitive, the self-conscious, urbane style identified most closely with Pope and Dryden, the product of "a polished age," as Percy described it, appeared to many as passionless and overwrought (Percy xiv). The complete story of the gradual movement from mid-century primitivism into the expressive Romanticism of the late century is too complex to be repeated here. But in considering the orality theory of this age, we may observe that as proto-Romantic theories gained influence, the decline of poetry came to be identified, implicitly or explicitly, with the progress of literacy. Having found in primitive orality the source of poetic greatness, these theorists naturally saw the advent of literacy as an important cause of poetic decline. As Pinkerton writes, "In proportion as Literature advanced in the World, Oral Tradition disappeared" (xv).

That said, the precise mechanisms by which literacy has this effect are not always clearly expressed. As the foregoing sections have sought to demonstrate, a well-developed theory of orality existed in this period, a theory whose ultimate conclusion was that orally composed poetry is superior to poetry composed in writing, because orality, especially that of cultural primitives, naturally generates what neoclassical aesthetics defined as authentic poetic language in its purest form. The logical corollary is that the spread of literacy is an important cause of poetry's general decline. This is more often stated implicitly than explicitly, largely because the theorists of this period understood the effects of literacy in what the previous chapter called *functional* terms. That is to say, their discussions of literacy's effect on poetry focus on practices, behaviours, or social conditions clearly enabled by writing or printing, rather than on the simple activities of reading and writing themselves. Despite some variation, in general these theories can be reduced to arguments that one or another of the primary neoclassical virtues of oral poetry (that is, simplicity and passion) is destroyed by these practices or behaviours.

Hugh Blair considers the introduction of writing to be primarily beneficial, for writing enables language to be preserved "to the most distant ages," and to be disseminated to "the most distant regions of the earth" (Blair, *Lectures* 171). This is the Platonic view of writing as a sort of travelling externalized memory, for which Blair quotes the relevant passages of *Phaedrus* (168). At the same time, he observes that these benefits are bought at the cost of poetic passion, as writing encourages calm reflection rather than passionate involvement in language. Unlike the hearer of an oral poem, the reader of a written poem "can pause, and revolve, and compare, at their leisure, one passage with another," and although Blair does not say so explicitly, the same is presumably true of the writer (171).

Blackwell would argue that literacy generates a new kind of "*acquired* Knowledge" that replaces the natural knowledge and virtues of the oral primitive, "such as spring up without other culture than the native *Bent* of their Genius, and their Converse among Mankind" (Blackwell 129). The heroes of Homer, he points out, became great without the aid of books. "Thus *Ulysses* grew up a sagacious, subtle, bold, persuasive Man, without the aid of Masters of *Rhetorick*," while Agamemnon was a resourceful general and politician "without studying *King-craft* or the Art of *War*" (129). When poetry ceases to express natural passion and becomes instead a literate and *literary* discipline centred on the written word, it declines into lifeless artificiality and scholasticism. As Blackwell explains,

> In this respect the TALENT of [the early Greek] Poets was truly *natural*, and had a much better title to Inspiration than their learned Successors; I mean, learned by Books; tho' I do not say that *Homer* or *Hesiod* had no Learning of this sort; But perhaps . . . the less of it the better. Certainly, *My Lord*, the *Scholastick* Turn, *Technical* Terms, imaginary Relations, and wire-drawn Sciences, spoil the natural Faculties, and marr the Expression. (Blackwell 129-30)

The power of book-learning to turn the poet away from his natural impulses and into the "dirty, muddy labyrinth" of scholasticism (Browne 65) is similarly identified by Ferguson as the cause of poetry's decline. Even in the earliest period of writing, the primitive poet "writes from observations he has made on the subject, not from the suggestion of books, and every production carries the mark of his character as a man, not of his mere proficiency as a student or scholar" (Ferguson 176). In later ages, the accumulation of books and the influence of scholastic institutions founded on books weigh heavily on the poet, who finds himself surrounded by "distant models . . . and wading through dark allusions and languages unknown," and ends as "a writer of a very inferior class" (176).

Perhaps the most complex theory of literacy's effect on oral poetry is that of John Brown, who states that "the Use of *Letters*" triggers the decline of poetry by enabling a division of the bard's social functions (Brown 36). Rendered obsolete as a repository of public memory, the bard degenerates into a mere entertainer. Simultaneously, society becomes more sophisticated and (according to Brown) morally lax, and the bard's songs, having been disconnected by literacy from their ancient purposes, become vulgar and trivial. His profession, "which had formerly been the Means of inculcating everything laudable and great, would now (when perverted to the contrary Purposes) be disdained by the Wise and Virtuous" (37). Separated from music, poetry becomes a purely visual art incapable of stirring the deepest passions. Brown also observes that literacy plays a curious role in the maintenance of this separation of poetry and music, for the oral poetry of the ancient bards ends up being preserved in dead languages which "could be read and imitated by *Scholars only*" (196). Brown considers scholars a particularly unmusical class of people, "swallowed up by a literary Application, often ignorant of the Powers of Music, and little acquainted with Society and Mankind" (196). Their monopoly on ancient poetry causes the traditional bardic modes to decay even further into coldness and artificiality, and they become "the *languid Amusement* of the *Closet*" (197).

At times, literacy is conflated with the general increase in intellectual sophistication accompanying the progress of civilization. Blair, for example, argues that a general increase in cultural sophistication increases the number and variety of words in the language, but this enlargement of the poet's vocabulary is more harmful than beneficial, encouraging rational precision and wordiness rather than passionate figuration and simplicity. "Language is become, in modern times, more correct, indeed, and accurate," Blair writes, "but, however, less striking and animated; In its antient state, more favourable to poetry and oratory; in its present, to reason and philosophy" (Blair, *Lectures* 157). Blair elaborates the connection between sophistication and the decline of passion in the context of the Longinian sublime, citing Homer, the Book of Genesis, and Ossian in defense of his contention that "conciseness and simplicity are essential to Sublime Writing," and are key components of "the plain and venerable manner of the antient times" (83, 82). The intense passion of oral composition precludes a verbose, affected style, for the reason that such a style signals a *relaxation* of emotional tension. The presence of these literary faults shows that "[t]he strength of the feeling is emasculated," says Blair, and "the Beautiful may remain, but the Sublime is gone" (84). Verbosity and excess ornamentation are thus the telltale signs of a poet attempting to create the poetic sublime without experiencing the necessary passion. They are therefore markers that identify *imitators* of the ancient style. But as William Shenstone would suggest in *On Writing and Books* (1764), imitation and frivolous complication are inevitable features of literate cultures where the pure, simple performances of departed masters linger in books to haunt their successors. "The chief advantage that ancient writers can boast over modern ones, seems owing to simplicity," writes Shenstone (Shenstone 911). But when every simple, honest truth has already been recorded by oral bards fired with the passion of natural speech, the options for literate poets in succeeding generations are limited: "Every noble truth and sentiment was expressed by the former in the natural manner; in word and phrase, simple, perspicuous, and incapable of improvement. What then remained for later writers but affectation, witticism, and conceit?" (Shenstone 911).

These arguments would have their greatest impact as foundational elements of the theory of poetry expressed by Wordsworth in the Preface (and 1802 Appendix to the Preface) to *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth's vision of "the earliest poets of all nations" (Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" 266) is clearly structured by eighteenth-century primitivist theories. While Wordsworth does not mention orality specifically, that orality was the nature of ancient poetry was widely accepted by the turn of the century, and this assumption forms the background of his discussion. We see this clearly when he speaks of the "the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers" (252). Wordsworth argues that the descent of poetic diction into verbosity and affectation is the literary manifestation of an emotional change caused by the loss of direct contact with nature. "The earliest poets of all nations generally wrote from passion excited by real events," he states. "They wrote naturally . . . [f]eeling powerfully as they did, their language was daring and figurative" (266). The language of this early poetry is clearly the spontaneous orality of eighteenth-century theory, for it is "really *spoken* by men, language which the poet himself had *uttered* when he had been affected by the events which he described, or which he had heard *uttered* by those around him" (267, emphasis added). The decline of poetry results when this situation changes, and

> . . . poets and men ambitious of the fame of poets, perceiving the influence of such language and desirous of producing the same effect without having the same animating passion, set themselves to a mechanical adoption of those figures of speech, and made use of them, sometimes with propriety, but much more frequently applied them to feelings and ideas with which they had no natural connection whatsoever. (266)

The theory of poetry behind this analysis is the Longinian primitivism we have already examined. From this perspective, the defining characteristic of these later poets is that they *lack the passion* of primitive poets. They have become sophisticated, detached from nature by intellectuality and ambition, studying the works of the bards and imitating their style without feeling. Their poetry consists of "misapplying . . . expressions which at first had been dictated by real passion" (267). According to Wordsworth, these poets arise "[i]n succeeding times," in phases of society subsequent to that of the ancient bards (266). As we have seen, primitivist theorists held that the border between ancient and modern poetry is defined by the invention of writing, and while Wordsworth does not repeat this argument explicitly, he nevertheless contends that the distortions of imitative poetry become "received as a natural language" only through "the influence of books"

(267). He thus concludes by juxtaposing the oral sublimity of the Old Testament's *Proverbs* with the "hubbub" of Johnson, the arch-writer and Dictionary-maker (268).[1]

Print and the Commercialization of Poetry

A second facet of Wordsworth's argument indicates a further late-century development in theories of poetry's decline. As the century's literacy boom progressed and printing presses multiplied to change England at every cultural level, critics favouring sociological theories of the decline of poetry began to see *printing* as the bane of neoclassical poetic virtues. As with writing in general, printing is generally conflated in these writers with its social effects, the most significant of which is the commercialization of poetry. The integration of poetry into the economy of printing transforms poetry into an industrial product, one that must be continually produced and marketed for the industry to remain viable.[2] To think that printing might have negative side-effects seems to have been difficult for an age infatuated with the promise of this technology, but writers who contemplated the state of eighteenth-century poetry frequently found themselves implicating commercialism, and therefore indirectly the technology that makes the commercialization of literature possible. A 1797 article in

---

[1] As usual, the Romantics are a bit unfair to Johnson, who was himself influenced (or at least very aware) of the primitivistic tendency of his age. We see this in Imlac's dissertation on poetry in *Rasselas*, which recapitulates key themes of Wordsworth's argument: "And it fills me yet with wonder, that, in almost all countries, the most ancient poets are considered the best . . . the first writers took possession of the most striking objects for description, and the most probable occurrences for fiction, and left nothing to those that followed them, but transcription of the same events, and new combinations of the same images. It is commonly observed that the early writers are in possession of nature, and their followers in art, that the first excel in strength and invention, and the latter in elegance and refinement" (Johnson 1029).

[2] See remarks in the preceding chapter on the genesis of the broadside trade.

Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review* exemplifies the complexities of this position. Titled "On the Changes Occasioned by Inventions and Improvements in the Last Fifteen Years," the essay begins by praising print for its stabilizing effect on human progress:

> The velocity, with which practical improvement has proceeded in its career, resembles that of a comet, when it approaches the sun. About the middle of the fourteenth century it began to return from its APHELION: that it will ever absolutely reach it's PARHELION, while the art of printing remains an ark for civilization, amid the deluges of physical and moral convulsions, is not to be supposed. ("On the Changes" 220)

When the reviewer turns to assess the state of poetry, however, he is much less enthusiastic. In the midst of general improvement, poetry has fallen into serious decay: "Poetry, of the highest, that is, the epic kind, we have none" (221). The cause, he argues, is the subjection of poetry to the whims of a print marketplace driven primarily by the desire for stimulation and novelty. Poetry thus loses its traditional place as the imaginative expression of natural passion, becoming "a procuress, rather than a censor of vice and folly" (221).

This is in essence the argument of Wordsworth, and in a related way, of William Hazlitt. For Wordsworth, the commercialization of poetry aggravates deficiencies of taste caused by life in busy, crowded cities. As the simple, natural life of the primitive poet is reflected in his language and art, "the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident," creates an audience disconnected from nature and deaf to simple beauties of language (Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" 254). Print poets are therefore driven by commercial pressures to gratify, even stimulate, the sensationalist cravings of print consumers. "To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves," complains Wordsworth (254). Efficient mass distribution of the unnatural products of urban print culture ("the rapid communication of intelligence"; Wordsworth is perhaps thinking here of the distribution of magazines and newspapers by stagecoach [254]) continually stimulates "this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation" (254). The result is that "the invaluable works of our elder writers... are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" (254). If we examine this argument in the context of his remarks on imitation, we see that Wordsworth's theory of poetic decline views printing as the nervous system of an urban-commercial civilization which alienates man from nature and replaces the simple passions of the rural primitive with avarice, ambition, and the technology to gratify them. The sublimity of ancient oral poetry vanishes, replaced by affectation, ornament, and sensationalism. This "perverted" poetic taste, made possible by the separation of poet and nature, is then stimulated by mass dissemination, deluging a mechanized, desensitized nation with cheap literary trash (266).

Hazlitt would give this argument a twist in his essay "Why the Arts Are Not Progressive" (1814). Beginning with the familiar proposition that "[t]he arts hold immediate communication with nature, and are only derived from that source" (Hazlitt, "Progressive" 293), Hazlitt repeats the commonplace that "[t]he greatest poets, the ablest orators, the best painters, and the finest sculptors that the world ever saw, appeared soon after the birth of these arts, and lived in a state of society which was, in other respects, comparatively barbarous" (293). The tendency of these arts to decline in later ages, however, is wholly attributable to "the diffusion of taste" by "artificial means" (294). These artificial means are only partially defined; Hazlitt is speaking of all of the arts together, and gives no example particular to any individual art, although he vaguely refers to the creation of "public institutions," no doubt thinking of the Royal Academy (294). However, when we consider that Hazlitt sees the problem to be the mass diffusion of *good* taste, the creation of legions of imitators who drown "in the noisy suffrages of shallow smatterers of taste" the "highest efforts of genius," we may speculate that in the case of poetry, the simultaneous growth of literacy and commercial printing are the primarily responsible for the overwhelming of the true, ancient taste (294). Hazlitt's argument thus seems to be a greatly compressed and slightly altered version of Wordsworth's, combining the latter's condemnation of artistic imitativeness and his disdain for the indiscriminate diffusion of poetry by commercial print.

Thomas Percy would locate the decline of poetry in another element of print culture, its spawning of a new profession, that of the *hack* poet. The case is made in the conclusion of Percy's history of minstrelsy. He begins by arguing that even after the introduction of writing, oral poets seem to have resisted the new technology: "For it is to be observed, that so long as Minstrels subsisted, they seem never to have designed their rhimes for literary publication, and probably never committed them to writing themselves" (Percy liv). Their decline had begun with the coming of writing, but the final blow would not be administered until the invention of the printing press. The industrialization of poetry supplants the minstrels with "[a] new race of Ballad-writers . . . who wrote narrative songs merely for the press" (liv). These poets-for-pay are "an inferior sort of minor poets," a degenerate race of imitators, and the faults of their poetry reflect their mercenary motives (liv). Unlike the ancient bards and their successors the minstrels, the hacks have no personal connection to the events they write about. They therefore write without passion, and their works are destitute of the "romantic wildness" of the older ballads (liv). Their metre is less individual and more regular, and their diction sacrifices sublimity for precision, having "a low or subordinate correctness, sometimes bordering on the insipid" (liv). For Percy, the commercialization of poetry through printing thus provides the primary impetus for the kind of destructive, half-hearted imitation lamented by Wordsworth and Hazlitt.

Poetical Sketches and the Problems of Primitivism

It is interesting to consider *Poetical Sketches* in the light of these theories. Printed conventionally and prefaced with an uncharacteristically humble Advertisement, *Sketches* is the only book of Blake's that might be said to participate openly in the mainstream literary culture of his day. It is well-established that the *Sketches* demonstrate his youthful immersion in that culture, but more relevant to the present point is the keen interest they display in literary primitivism. If the young Blake was mocked by his fellow apprentice engravers for his unfashionably retrograde taste in drawings and paintings, as Benjamin Heath Malkin has recorded (Bentley, *Records* 422), his taste in poetry appears to have been similarly backward-looking, although perhaps less unfashionably so. Studies of the book have often emphasized "the apparent derivativeness of that volume's contents" (Gleckner 2), as demonstrated in Robert Gleckner's catalogue of the *Sketches*, which lists

> . . . the Thomsonian seasons poems, the Spenserian diurnal poems, the Percyan Gothic ballad *Fair Elenor*, the Elizabethan songs, the Chattertonian *Gwin, King of Norway*, the eighteenth-century Spenser imitation, the Shakespearian *King Edward the Third*, the Ossianic prose poems, and the Miltonic *Samson*. Add to these the distinct evidence of Collins, Gray, Akenside, the Wartons, Beattie, and of course the Bible. . . . (2)

As Gleckner makes clear, the *Sketches* are a sampler of eighteenth-century poetic styles with a primitivistic emphasis. This is especially true if we consider that Spenser (a stylistic primitivist himself), Shakespeare and Milton were widely believed by neoclassicist critics to exemplify the spirit of ancient poetry.[1] Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the *Sketches*, however, is the breadth and self-consciousness of their imitativeness. To imitate a single style may reflect unconscious participation in a literary trend, but to imitate so variously suggests conscious experimentation and a refined awareness of genre and style. The predominance of primitivistic styles in the *Sketches* thus indicates that even at a young age, Blake was interested in recovering or reviving the poetic greatness of the ancient bards. Indeed, Blake openly expresses his sympathy with primitivistic theories of poetry in "To the Muses." The Muses, he writes, have gone into hiding, "forsaking Poetry," since the days of the oral bards' "antient melody" (E 417). With the departure of the Muses, poetry becomes stilted and weak:

---

[1] See, for instance, Thomas Love Peacock, who in *The Four Ages of Poetry* cites "Shakespeare and his contemporaries" and even Milton as belonging to the golden or primitive age of English poetry (Peacock 13).

> How have you left the antient love
> That bards of old enjoy'd in you!
> The languid strings do scarcely move!
> The sound is forc'd, the notes are few! (E 417)

Critics have typically approached this poem from the perspective of Blake's later characterization of the Greek Muses as emblems of a classical tradition he rejected, as the "Daughters of Memory" rather than the "Daughters of Inspiration" (E 95). John Ehrstine, for example, sees the poem as either "an early abortive attempt" at his later vision of poetic renewal, or as "a useless endeavour to revitalize poetry through memory" (Ehrstine 6). For Robert Gleckner, the invocation of the classical Muses needs to be interpreted in the light of Blake's heavy borrowing from Milton's *Comus*. Noting the presence here of a number of Miltonic phrases, Gleckner observes that although "much of this diction was commonplace in the poetic realm Blake was nurtured in, its collective occurrence in *Comus* and *To the Muses* argues against mere coincidence" (Gleckner 35). Gleckner cites this as evidence that Blake transcends the neoclassical clichés of the poem's theme and diction by subtly invoking the Hebraic-Christian poet Milton as his true Muse. Stuart Peterfreund expands this argument to embrace the collection as a whole, arguing that the *Sketches* are an embryonic manifestation of a struggle between what he calls "the civilized delusions of the classical tradition" (Peterfreund 83) and a "biblical model" of poetry "which grants language access to the infinite" (78-9). Arguing that many seemingly innocuous lines in the *Sketches* are actually biblical echoes and allusions, Peterfreund asserts that Blake achieves a kind of profound originality *through* the imitation of Hebraic discourse. He first identifies a "classicizing tendency" in Blake's adaptation and re-working of neoclassical tropes (76-7), and observes that Blake would later denounce this tendency as pernicious. Citing Robert Lowth's vision of Hebrew poetry as the product of divine inspiration, Peterfreund then argues that Blake's Hebraic allusions have a much different meaning, that they foreshadow the prophetic voice of the poet's maturity and redeem the *Sketches* into true originality through the significance of the tradition they invoke.

Such interpretations, however, seem to postulate unnecessarily subtle continuities between Blake's early and later work. As Thomas Vogler writes, "What we have in these approaches is a system of similarities and difference, where even the most extreme similarity [to neoclassical tradition] is seen as superficial, while the difference claimed is radical" (Vogler, "Troping" 110). In "To the Muses," more obvious than the invocation of a Miltonic or Hebraic Muse is the poem's clear expression of the neoclassical primitivist impulse as exemplified by Blackwell and Blair. Given the prevalence of neoclassical styles and genres (notably pastoral) in the *Sketches*, there seems no need to imagine that Blake had completely rejected the classics at this early point in his life.[1] Although he would later protest vigourously against the militarizing influence of classical tradition on English literature, arguing that both Shakespeare and Milton "were curbd by the general malady & infection from the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword" (E 95), it would be 1804 before he would visit the Truchsessian gallery and proclaim himself free of the "spectrous Fiend" who is "Jupiter of the Greeks" (E 756). If there is indeed a problem with this poem, it is the one Wordsworth would later analyze. The poem is composed almost entirely of what Wordsworth memorably calls "many expressions in themselves proper and beautiful, but which have been foolishly repeated by many bad poets till such feelings of disgust are connected with them as it is scarcely possible by any art of association to overpower" (Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" 253). John Aiken indicates the nature of these expressions more precisely in his *Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry* (1777), observing that "[a]n ordinary versifier seems no more able to conceive of the Morn without rosy fingers and dewy locks, or Spring without flowers and showers, loves and groves, than any of the heathen deities without their useful attributes" (qtd. in Gleckner 60). This phraseology is ultimately traceable to the oral poetry of the ancients ("rosy fingers" of morning, for instance, is a Homeric epithet), but their indiscriminate use by poets who are disconnected from nature by urbanization and scholarly and linguistic sophistication taints Blake's poem by association. That Ehrstine and Gleckner feel it important to defend "To the Muses" from accusations of imitativeness suggests that the staleness of the imitation threatens to overwhelm the poem's primitivist message, forcing even sympathetic readers to try to rationalize what appears to be Blake's youthful inconsistency.

---

[1] Fuller discussion of Blake's view of classical inspiration may be found in Chapter III.

But in fact, this inconsistency is real, and its presence haunts *Poetical Sketches*. As Ehrstine has remarked, "To the Muses" is "a perfect example of utterly languid, eighteenth-century verse" (Ehrstine 6), the very type of verse against which primitivist theorists were reacting, against which Blake himself is reacting in that very poem and in the many primitivist experiments of the *Sketches*. But Ehrstine is in error when he argues that the poem "states a problem but no solution" (6). The imitative style is itself a kind of solution to the problem of the vanished Muses, and certain strains of primitivist thinking held that it could be a successful solution. The supreme example of the successful imitator was, of course, Virgil. Blackwell states that "Virgil well knew the Importance of this Imitation of ancient *Manners*," and that the Roman poet borrowed from earlier writers not only factual information about the past, but also "the strong obsolete Turn of his Sentences" (Blackwell 57). Even Peacock, who detested Romantic primitivism, defended Virgil as the "most obvious and striking example" of the successful imitation of primitive poetry, describing him as the principal figure of the "silver age" of ancient poetry, an age whose primary mode of composition was "recasting, and giving an exquisite polish to, the poetry of the age of gold" (Peacock 8). There is evidence that Blake, too, accepted imitation as a legitimate form of primitivistic expression, even many years after the publication of *Poetical Sketches*. In his marginalia to Wordsworth's "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface of *Lyrical Ballads*," for example, he states his belief that the Ossian and Thomas Rowley forgeries genuinely embody the spirit of antiquity. "I Believe both Macpherson & Chatterton, that what they say is Ancient, Is so," he writes, adding, "I own myself an admirer of Ossian equally with any other Poet whatever Rowley & Chatterton also" (E 666, 665). That he names Rowley separately from Chatterton shows that he knows the Rowley poems were forged, while his approbation indicates a belief that such imitation could be a vehicle for the true spirit of ancient poetry.

But there is also evidence in the *Sketches* that straightforward imitation had begun to prove unsatisfactory to Blake. Many of the poems show him straining at the leash of imitation, reworking and adapting primitivistic forms as he reworked the pastoral "seasons" poems, reinvigorating the personifications of pastoral cliché by infusing them with a vivid orality. In "Gwin, King of Norway," for example, the native oral Ossianic-balladic voice is adopted and reconfigured even more dramatically than was the pastoral background of the "seasons" poems. The poem (overtly presented as a song) begins with an invitation to the listeners to gather around, a common cross-cultural feature of oral story-telling, as Edwards and Sienkiwicz note (Edwards and Sienckiwicz 45-46), and one found in Percy's *Reliques* in the ballad "King Estmere," which begins:

> Hearken to me, gentlemen,
> Come and you shall heare;
> Ile tell you of two of the boldest brethren
> That ever born y-were. (Percy 65)

Blake's adaptation of the formula ("Come, Kings, and listen to my song" [E 417]) would seem to confirm the standard contemporary view of the ancient bard as companion and entertainer of kings. Percy makes this argument at some length in the essay prefatory to the *Reliques*, observing of the bards that "their attendance was solicited by kings; and they were every where loaded with honours and rewards" (Percy xxii). The blunt absence of formality in Blake's opening, however, signals a revision of the bardic persona, a revision further dramatized in the harsh message that follows. For as David Erdman notes, "'Gwin' prophesies the downfall of royalty" (Erdman, *Prophet* 28). Recounting as he does the story of the destruction of cruel king Gwin by Gordred, a giant figure who emerges from the earth as an apparent embodiment of the vengeful spirit of the land and its populace, Blake's bard is an almost total inversion of the bardic figure as envisioned by Blackwell, Percy, and Macpherson. An enemy of kings, the narrator of "Gwin" more closely resembles the proud, free British bard as imagined by radical antiquarians like Blake's acquaintance, William Owen Pughe (for whom he later painted *The Ancient Britons*). Thomas Gray had preceded Blake in bringing such a figure to life in "The Bard" (1757), but the "Gwin" bard is more aggressively radical, less traditional, than Gray's creation, its most obvious literary model.[1] Gray's bard prophesies the destruction of the invading Norman king Edward I, but simultaneously laments the fall of the "genuine kings" of the "Briton-line" (Gray 57). The hatred of Blake's bard, on the other hand, is directed not at a single conquering king, but at the principle of aristocratic rule. The war narrated in "Gwin" is sparked by feudal oppression, depicted by the bard in openly hostile terms:

> The Nobles of the land did feed
> Upon the hungry Poor;
> They tear the poor man's lamb, and drive
> The needy from their door! (E 417)

---

[1] Note that Blake exhibited a painting of Gray's bard (*The Bard, From Gray*) in the Royal Academy in 1784, the year after the publication of *Poetical Sketches*.

Responsibility for the bloodshed that follows is assigned to the institution of monarchy itself: "O what have Kings to answer for / Before that awful throne!" (420). In its energetic violence ("Down from the brow unto the breast / Gordred his head divides!" [E 420]) the poem seems patterned after the more graphic of Percy's martial ballads, and indeed, Blake may have found in these ballads embryonic elements of the "Gwin"-narrator's antipathy to monarchy. In spite of Percy's contention that the minstrels were the companions of kings, many of his ballads reflect a subversive point of view. "Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne," a tale of the humiliation and defeat of a nobleman by an outlaw, is the most obvious example, while the second version of "Chevy Chace" concludes with a prayer that "henceforth . . . foul debate / 'Twixt noblemen may cease" (Percy 286). Similarly, the "Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence" implicitly condemns the thoughtlessness of a king who sends his best sailor to a pointless death while "Drinking the blude-reid wine" (81). But the anti-monarchical message of "Gwin" is more pointed than any of these. Comparing the narrative tone of "Gwin" to that of the other politically oriented *Sketches*, notably the dramatic fragment *King Edward the Third* and the "Prologue Intended for a Dramatic Piece of King Edward the Fourth," Robert Gleckner argues that the tone of these pieces echoes Isaiah's prophecy of Armageddon:

> Come near, ye nations, to hear; and hearken, ye people; let the earth hear, and all that is therein; the world, and all things that come forth of it. For the indignation of the LORD is upon all nations, and his fury upon all their armies: he hath utterly destroyed them, he hath delivered them to the slaughter. (Isaiah 34:1-2)

This comparison seems apt in the case of "Gwin," which concludes with a grimly jubilant depiction of the destruction of the tyrant's armies, who "did fill the vale of death" (E 420). Erdman, too, notices the Old Testament quality of "Gwin" in his remarks that Gordred is "a champion in the Biblical tradition" (Erdman, *Prophet* 28). As suggested earlier, Gleckner interprets the Biblical presence in these *Sketches* as part of a system of allusions that redeems the poems from the apparent imitativeness of their outward forms. But if we instead *insist* on the imitativeness of "Gwin," we see that Blake has synthesized two kinds of imitation, two primitivisms, the native tradition of English balladry (extending back to the Celtic bards of ancient Britain) and the tradition of Hebrew prophetic verse. We see, then, that Blake is *embracing* imitation in this poem, not transcending it, for primitivism serves a number of purposes for him here. First, it provides him with models of powerful political voices. In his comments on "Gwin," Erdman notes that "in Blake's elevated conception of bardic power we can see the influence of Percy's thesis . . . that Saxon minstrels and other ancient poets enjoyed tremendous political and moral eminence" (33). This was not only Percy's thesis, but a more general thesis of primitivist theory. Blackwell, for instance, asserts that the Homeric bards were "welcome to Kings and Courts; were necessary at Feasts and Sacrifices; and were highly reverenced by the People" (Blackwell 114). "Few people have conceived a just Opinion of this Profession, or entered into its *Dignity*," he concludes in this respect (113). For his part, Lowth emphasizes the religious authority of the ancient bards, the perceived unity of poetic and religious inspiration in primitive oral culture, where "[t]hey considered Poetry as something sacred and celestial, not produced by human art or genius, but altogether a divine gift. Among them, therefore, poets were accounted sacred, with an immediate and familiar intercourse with the Gods" (Lowth 49-50).[1] Second, primitivism provides Blake with a theory that accounts for the power of the bardic voice. The social preeminence of the ancient bards was partly a product of the social conditions of preliterate society. As Percy argued, the "rude admiration" in which they were held was of the type "ever shown by an ignorant people to such as excel among them in intellectual accomplishments" (Percy xxii). But theories of orality also suggested that the oral poetry of the ancient bards was exceedingly passionate and therefore capable of stimulating passion in the listener. Blake thus had a theory explaining the nature of the bard's power. Finally, these theories gave him a set of formal attributes (genre, diction, subject) that according to primitivist theory were organic embodiments of the passion of bardic orality.

In the case of "Gwin," the passion in question is rebellious indignation. Erdman conjectures that the more political *Sketches* were written during the years of the American Revolution, and observes that they "express an intense, even propagandistic abhorrence of war-making kings" (Erdman, *Prophet* 18). For Blake, then, primitivist imitation is not merely an exercise in ambition or greed. A genuine political passion motivates him here to imitate the forms that his age associated with powerful public poetry. Thus we see that in "Gwin" Blake moves beyond mechanical imitation to begin *assimilating* primitivist theory and molding it into new, synthetic forms designed to serve the purposes of late-eighteenth-century political radicalism. Imitation is here shading into influence, passionless repetition of oral forms shading into an attempt to reinvigorate those forms with modern passions as strong as those that motivated the ancient bards. It is worth noting that the "Advertisement" to the *Sketches* claims for them "a poetic originality, which merited some respite from oblivion" (qtd. in Ehrstine 1). While the nature of this writer's idea of originality is unclear (indeed, the very identity of the writer is unclear), the true originality of "Gwin" may be found in its recognition and adaptation of the essential unity of primitivist traditions. Blake's imitation thus becomes a creative act of assimilation, the creation of a composite voice (part Saxon minstrel, part Hebrew prophet, part Paineite revolutionary) appropriate to both his political passion and sense of audience. In short, Blake does not transcend imitativeness, he *makes use* of it.

---

[1] The importance of this point for the study of Blake's mature work is a primary subject of Chapter III.

The imitative and occasionally renovative synthesis of primitivistic styles is a marked characteristic of the more interesting *Sketches*. Gleckner has remarked on the "derivative mélange of Ossianic and biblical language and tonalities" that comprises "The Couch of Death," a poem that attempts to focus these borrowed voices into a passionate and characteristically Blakean vision of the falseness of the religion of sin and accusation (Gleckner 129). "Samson" is most obviously biblical and Miltonic, but Blake leavens his Hebraism here with an unexpected dose of classical epic. The opening line ("Samson, strongest of the children of men, I sing" (E 443]) is more like Virgil than Milton (in Dryden's translation, the *Aeneid* begins, "Arms, and the man I sing" [Virgil 1]). This retelling of the Samson story in the accents of Virgilian Roman militarism ("Caesar [is] Virgils only God" Blake would later write [E 669]), accentuates the prose poem's portrayal of Samson as a false Christ, a military-minded "Deliverer" who succumbs to temptation as Jesus did not (E 445). But it also lends the work (or at least, seems meant to have lent it) a touch of Homeric sublimity, evoking the heroic atmosphere of the classical epic while simultaneously giving the poem an air of oral performance.

It would be easy, however, to overstate the success of these imitations. Few would argue that the jumble of primitivisms in these later *Sketches* (including, of course, the ragged graveyard balladry of "Fair Elenor") is artistically satisfying. Conspicuously absent is the firm imaginative outline, the fully developed political and personal philosophy that would one day enable Blake to synthesize primitivistic styles and diction seamlessly in the illuminated prophecies. These early poems are artistically uneven, even jarring in their graceless syntheses of disparate genres and styles (the Virgilian, even vaguely Ossianic "Samson" may serve as an example here). Even where Blakean themes are clearly present, and it is clear that primitivistic voices are serving Blake's own prophetic passion, the layered imitativeness makes the poems seem heavy and overwrought. As Wordsworth would no doubt have noted, the *simplicity* of primitive orality is almost completely buried in these poems under a chaos of mismatched rhetorical styles. Paradoxically, the *Sketches* are often most successful when Blake is least original, where he most closely follows what Peacock called the "silver age" model of poetry, polishing and refining the language of the ancients, rather than attempting to revive it. Blake would later mock this approach to poetry ("Thus Hayley on his Toilette seeing the Sope / Cries Homer is very much improvd by Pope" [E 505]), but many of the smaller poems, in particular the imitations of Elizabethan pastorals, have significant beauties. Like the "seasons" poems that open the collection, they at times exemplify a vitality that seems to stem from Blake's own vivid experience of the natural world. Despite their conventional subject matter and style, the poems approach the emotional simplicity attributed to the oral primitive rather than merely imitating it, and it seems significant that in most of the smaller poems (most of which are simply named "Song"), sound is the primary medium of knowledge. This is striking, for example, in "Love and harmony combine" where, as the speaker unfolds his arboreal metaphor, the delights of love are described primarily as aural phenomena, as the songs of birds nesting in the tree formed by the lovers' union. Joys are known by their "Chirping loud, and singing sweet," while the dove who "buildeth there" is known by her "mournful song" (E 414). The speaker becomes aware of the presence of Love himself when he hears his voice among the branches: "There is love: I hear his tongue" (E 414). The effect here is predominantly oral, as it is in "I love the jocund dance" (a poem Wordsworth admired), where a pastoralized rural England is described almost exclusively in terms of its sounds. The dance itself is characterized by "The softly breathing song . . . where lisps the maiden's tongue" (E 414). The poet continues in this vein, describing "the laughing vale" and "the echoing hill," where "the jolly swain laughs his fill" (E 414). The old villagers who watch the dance "laugh our sports to see" (E 414). Only in the third stanza is the description visual, and this ("white and brown is our lot") is noticeably weaker that the others, which are conventional but possessed of some energy (E 414). The following song, "Memory, hither come," too, is structured around a metaphor of which orality is the vehicle. The melancholy speaker listens to "the merry notes" of memory's "song," and the fragile immanence of memory is suggested by the conceit (E 415). As in the "seasons" poems, orality is the vehicle of poetic vitality, breathing some small life into what might easily have been only a stale recapitulation of familiar pastoral phrases and images.

From the perspective of the study of orality in Blake, *Poetical Sketches* is interesting largely as a collection of experiments suggesting both the possibilities and pitfalls of embracing primitivist poetics. Blake shows an awareness of primitivist theory and a conviction that it might lead him to recover ancient bardic power, but the poems show a mismatch between form and intent. Where imitativeness is adapted as a vehicle for original passion, as in "Gwin," the ancient diction and forms seem archaic and stilted. Where the diction and forms seem appropriate, the passions themselves are weak and conventional. For all the minor beauties the *Sketches* possess, even at their best they often seem little more than case studies for the primitivist critique of literate poetic culture. But the meaningful presence of orality in both its most simple forms (oral-aural imagery) and its most theoretical forms (the adaptation of the genres and styles of primitive oral poetry) indicates the important influence of primitivist thinking on the young Blake, and tells us that we must look to these theories to understand the meaning of orality in "our noisiest poet." It is a cliché to observe that in the *Sketches* Blake had not yet found his poetic voice; it may be less banal to point out that these poems show that he had grasped, however tentatively, both the nature of his voice and its theoretical potential.

Songs of Innocence: Recovery and Problematization

Primitivist theorists of a reforming temperament looked beyond imitation to seek more radical solutions to the problem of poetic decline. Some saw solutions in the creation of Royal Academy-like institutions to encourage the reunion of poetry and orality. John Brown, for example, attempts in the conclusion of his *Dissertation* to court royal support for the establishment of "*A Poetical and Musical Academy*, for the more effectual *Re-Union* of these two Arts, and their better *Direction* to their *highest Ends*" (Brown 238). Brown argues that such an academy would restore oral poetry to respectability, stimulating the growth of a new class of bards who could use the power of oral poetry to provide moral guidance to an increasingly decadent populace. As the next chapter will indicate, a similar reform program was proposed by the prominent elocutionist, Thomas Sheridan, who also saw orality's decline as a pressing public problem and felt a return to Greek and Roman oratorical models of education would bolster England's poetic, moral and cultural greatness. Other primitivist thinkers, however, looked inward for poetic reform, finding in their own experience of nature echoes of the passions of the ancient poets, and hoping to *recover* the oral simplicity of true poetic language by abandoning all attempts to *imitate* it. This, of course, is the program of Wordsworth, the return to "the real language of men," or as he at times calls it, "the real language of nature" (Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" 266, 260). For Wordsworth, however, this "real language" is not the exclusive province of the sociological primitive. To the degree that each individual retains something of primitive innocence, the "real language of men" flows spontaneously when this inner innocence responds to the natural world. As Abrams points out, "In Wordsworth's theory the relation between the language of 'Tintern Abbey' and the speech of a Lake Country shepherd is not primarily one of lexical or grammatical, but of genetic equivalence" (Abrams 110). "Both forms of discourse," he writes, "are instances of language really spoken by men under the stress of genuine feeling" (110).

Wordsworth seems to have conceived of this inner oral primitive in terms of a parallel familiar in primitivist theory. Shelley would express it in the memorable formula, "The savage is to ages what the child is to years" (Shelley 956). In their lack of sophistication, children seemed to embody the wild state of the primitive savage, "where untaught Nature rules," in the words of Brown (Brown 27). But it was also noted by some that young children live in a world of unmediated orality, that their language was as spontaneously passionate as that of any savage. One theorist in particular, Thomas Gunter Browne, argued explicitly that the nature of language might be best studied through the parallel study of preliterate cultures and young children. "Let us try the art of speech," he writes, "first in the woods and wilds, and afterwards in the nursery" (Browne 27). The vitality of poetic language, argues Browne, is the product of *youth*, either social or individual. Thus the best poets are savages, ancients, and children, all those unencumbered by the confusions of scholasticism. "How comes it that the oldest writers (such as Homer and Isaiah) were the happiest poets?" Browne asks. "[B]ecause they were the youngest talkers — Their art of speech was in an earlier state than our's" (65). So it is that "every child, or savage, may be called a poet" (65). Wordsworth's conception of poetic composition seems to owe much to a similar pairing of savage and child. In "The Rainbow," for example, he identifies the adult's poetic passion, generator of "the real language of men," as the survival of the unconstrained passion of childhood. His "heart leaps up" at the sight of a rainbow, he writes: "So was it when my life began, / So it is now I am a man" (Wordsworth, "Rainbow" 269). While this passion is now mediated by the intelligence and experience of adulthood, the child, "father of the man," is the source of the poet's continued inspiration (269).

If the child is the preliterate primitive who lives among us (and within us), it is significant that Blake turned to childhood for the theme of his next collection of poems. But the very title of *Songs of Innocence*, resonant with meaning in a way that "*Poetical Sketches*" was not, suggests the tremendous advance these poems represent over their predecessors. No longer "sketches," tentative and visual, these newer poems are presented nakedly and confidently as oral compositions, a fact emphasized on the illustrated title page, where the word "songs" is larger and more prominent than the latter and presumably more important portion of the title. Nevertheless, the word "Innocence" is highly significant, for it indicates that orality has here been assimilated into a larger philosophy. If the primitive oral voice has been recovered, it has also found a theme, a purpose beyond the mere conveyance of simple lyric beauty. The purpose here is to act as a symbol and linguistic manifestation of what Blake would later call a "state," that is to say, a self-contained perspective that must be distinguished from the individual who inhabits it (E 132).

On one level, the relationship between orality and the state of Innocence is simple. Orality is the condition of the uncorrupted child or savage, and many of the *Songs* ("The Ecchoing Green," "Laughing Song," "Spring," "Nurse's Song") are celebrations of the delight children have in singing and laughing, and of the beneficial effects these joyful oral effusions can have on the adults around them. On another level, the condition of primitive orality is implicitly present in the pastoral settings that dominate the collection. As was implied in the preceding chapter, the pastoral world is quite literally a *past-oral* world, an idealized state of oral simplicity. It may be the site of complex social and religious allegories, but as William Empson has said, the essence of pastoral is "the process of putting the complex into the simple" (quoted in Cooper 2), the transposition of the problems of a literate society into metaphoric dramas set in a simplified, idealized, preliterate society. Simply put, the shepherds of Arcadia sing, dance, play the tabor and pipe; they do not write or operate printing presses. In the context of the *Songs,* the pastoral setting may therefore be seen as an objectification of the mental state of childhood, or both may be seen as representations of the state of openness to natural beauty and spontaneous emotion, the state of perpetual "wonder and surprise" that characterizes (as Blair had explained) the experience of the primitive. As the *Songs* demonstrate even at their darkest, this openness is the state of Blakean innocence, the simplicity of the happy children of "Infant Joy" or "The Lamb," the simplicity that makes tragic the Chimney Sweeper and Little Black Boy. Critics of Blake's era seem to have appreciated the poems (and to have praised them above Blake's other poetry) primarily for this primitivistic simplicity. J.J.G. Wilkinson, one of the first editors of the *Songs*, and author of the most extensive early commentary, writes in his "Preface" (1839) that the *Songs* are not only "remarkable for the transparent depth of thought which constitutes true Simplicity," but that they unite temporal and individual primitivisms, giving us "glimpses of all that is holiest in the Childhood of the World and the Individual" (qtd. in Bentley, *Critical Heritage* 60). The poems "abound with the sweetest touches of that Pastoral life, by which the Golden Age may be still visibly represented to the iron one" (60).

There is, however, still another level to Blake's assimilation of orality in the *Songs of Innocence.* The "Introduction" to the collection acts as a frame that situates the entire body of poems within a narrative of the encounter of the primitive and modern worlds. One might even view the "Introduction" as an allegorical reconstruction of the history of language. The poem begins in a world of primal orality, where the narrator wanders through "valleys wild," playing "songs of pleasant glee" (E 7). At the bidding of the cloud-child, the narrator pipes "a song about a Lamb," (which could be any one of a number of the *Songs*), and after repeating the song to the child's delight, is commanded to drop the pipe and sing the song. Upon complying, the narrator is ordered to sit down and write the song "in a book that all may read" (E 7). This process mirrors to some degree the developmental program suggested by John Brown, who as we saw earlier, argued that the earliest form of communication is chaotic babbling, where the "*Voice* is thrown out in *Howls* and *Roarings:* Their *Language* is like the *Gabbling of Geese*" (Brown 27). Although he does not mention Brown, Thomas Vogler has argued that the onomatopoeic word "piping" is an echo of such gabbling, "the trace of a prior prelinguistic moment" (Vogler, "Hearing" 127). After imitative gabbling, Brown postulates the invention of music. The piping itself, then, and the verse that follows the intervention of the child, seem to echo his contention that "if we ascend a Step or two higher in the Scale of savage Life, we shall find this *Chaos* of *Gesture, Voice*, and *Speech*, rising into an agreeable *Order* and *Proportion*" (27). Music is ordered sound, and its effect on language is to render it melodic and rhythmical, and in so doing, to create oral poetry: "The mature Love of a *measured Melody*, which Time and Experience produce, throws the *Voice* into *Song*, the *Gesture* into *Dance*, the *Speech* into *Verse* or *Numbers*" (27). The final step, in which the piper-narrator drops his pipe and begins to write, mirrors the transition from orality to literacy. This step, so fraught with potential and peril to the eighteenth-century literary mind, signals the end of the piper-narrator's story, and the end of his pastoral world of simplicity and "wildness." The "hollow reed" is broken and pressed into service as a pen, and "the water clear" is "stain'd" to produce ink (E 7). As Vogler puts it, "The move from a prelinguistic utterance to its representation and amplification in written language is accompanied by hints that the process may contaminate its source" (Vogler, "Hearing" 127). In other words, the poem suggests that writing brings corruption into the pastoral world even as it preserves that world's orality in a new form "that all may read" (127). "The announced aim of writing (that 'Every child may joy to hear') pits itself against the contrary force and possible effects of writing, calling attention to the programmatic aspect of the volume's title as *Songs*," writes Vogler (127). The introduction of writing is a complicated act which simultaneously ends the simple pastoral innocence of the piper's world, and marks the beginning of a sophisticated *portrayal* of innocence, a portrayal that must participate in the literate, urban economy of commercial writing and printing if "every child" is actually to experience its joy. Thus the "Introduction" seems to acknowledge that the Innocence of Blake's *Songs* has its genesis in the complex Experience of a literate and well-read poet writing for the commercial marketplace. Even so, the poem ends by affirming the value of the paradoxical project of reconstituting primitive orality in the medium of writing. Every child may "joy to hear" the piper's preserved songs, presumably recreating them orally in their own reading, if they are to "hear" them (E 7). The implied finale of the allegory is the invisible reader, who revives the dormant orality of the recorded *Songs* by reciting them aloud in the manner common to that age. Blake rescues his primitivistic project by bracketing the written text with orality, leaving himself free to follow the piper's lead (E 7).

Taken as a whole, then, the *Songs of Innocence* move significantly beyond mere imitation, beyond even the Wordsworthian project of recovering the language of the oral primitive through introspection and openness to nature. Blake successfully ***makes use*** of the primitivistic voice to illustrate a major idea (the nature of Innocence) and to give dramatic force to less philosophical but equally important ideas (such as the suffering of innocents). Simultaneously, he confronts directly the paradox of literary primitivism, acknowledging the problematic nature of his quest to recover the oral voice in writing, and hinting at a solution that enlists the reader's participation in the renewal of oral poetry. Blake would thus seem to have conquered (at least in theory) the problem of poetic decline. But even as he was writing *Songs of Innocence* he had already begun, with *The Book of Thel,* to seek an even more radical union of literate and oral expression. The next chapter identifies eighteenth-century theories of orality at the heart of Blake's mature mythology and metaphysics by examining his model of poetic composition, the theory of spiritual dictation.

Chapter III

Practical Orality in an Age of Print:

The "Dictation" Model of Poetry

This chapter considers Blake's model of composition as spiritual dictation. It argues that this model, often mistaken for naive spiritualism or even insanity, is more usefully understood as a fusion of eighteenth-century primitivist theory and Blakean metaphysics. This fusion has two important aspects. First, Blake places orality at the heart of the writing process by conceptualizing composition as a two-part operation involving a speaker and an amanuensis. This placement is examined historically through a comparison of Blake's remarks on oratory (in the introduction to *Jerusalem* and elsewhere) with the writings of Thomas Sheridan, founder of the Elocutionary Movement. Blake's view of oratory is in many ways similar to Sheridan's, but rejects the Lockean underpinnings of Sheridan's theory in favour of an anthropomorphized, anti-materialist cosmology. This cosmology has roots in Romantic-era views of the conceptual modes of oral cultures, and represents a second significant fusion of Blakean philosophical principles and proto-Romantic cultural history. In the chapter's final sections, some potential problems with a primitivist reading of the dictation model are considered. The fluid notion of textuality implied by Blake's extensive revisions of his "dictated" poetry is examined, and I suggest that this notion is similar to that known to exist in preliterate cultures. This leads to a discussion of the dictation model's consistency with another of Blake's most tenaciously held beliefs about art, his theory of the unity of conception and execution.

A Historical Approach to the Dictation Model

Perhaps the most striking feature of Blake's theory of art is that he frequently refers to his process of composition as spiritual *dictation*. The first record of an external spirit directing his verse occurs in *Poetical Sketches*, where "the angel of Truth" is invoked to guide the poet's hand as he writes the "Samson" prose-poem (E 443). In the Preludium to *The Book of Urizen*, Blake calls upon the Eternals to "Dictate swift winged words" (E 70), while two of the twelve extant copies of *Europe* contain a preliminary plate indicating that the poem was dictated by "a Fairy" (E 60). *Milton*, on the other hand, originates with the Daughters of Beulah, who "Record the journey of immortal Milton" by "descending down the Nerves" of the poet's arm (E 96). *Jerusalem* is the work of "the Saviour," who "dictate[s] the words of this mild song" to the trembling Blake (E 146). These passages occur within the imaginative world of Blake's poems, but there is abundant evidence that Blake considered spiritual dictation to be more than a literary convention. In a letter of 1803 to Thomas Butts, he claims to have written *Milton* "from immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my Will" (E 728-9). In another letter, he explains that he is free to praise his own work, since he is not, in fact, the author: "I dare not pretend to be any other than the Secretary the Authors are in Eternity" (E 730). He makes a similar claim in "To the Public," the introduction to *Jerusalem*, stating that "this Verse was . . . dictated to me" (E 145). In a letter that must have confirmed Hayley's reservations about his proletarian protégé, Blake claims to be writing at that moment from the dictation of his dead brother, Robert (E 705).

Blake seems to have treated his visions and voices with remarkable casualness, but his readers, critics and acquaintances have found them more troubling. They are an important source of the belief, common during his lifetime, that Blake was mad. "The more orthodox philosophers of this period tended to equate any form of religious enthusiasm with mental derangement," notes Peter Ackroyd, so that "to claim divine inspiration, as Blake often did, was to be almost automatically labelled insane" (Ackroyd 223). And labelled he was. His friend George Cumberland described him as "dim'd with superstition" (qtd. in Ackroyd 223), and the artistic-commercial world of London came to the same conclusion, according to Benjamin Heath Malkin, who wrote that "[Blake has] been stigmatised as an engraver, who might do tolerably well, if he was not mad" (qtd. in Ackroyd 268). Twentieth-century critics are much less inclined to dismiss Blake as a crank or lunatic, but are equally reluctant to take the dictation model at face value. The prevailing modern view is perhaps best expressed by Timothy Clark, who remarks that "To anyone with knowledge of the current state of literary studies, nothing sounds more trite, mystifying, and even embarrassing than talk of writers as 'inspired'" (Clark 1). "The most novel, and no doubt most risky aspect" of his own study, he adds, "is, with qualification, to take writers' claims to inspiration seriously, relating them to certain real effects of the varying material dynamics of the process of composition" (9). Although Clark does not address Blake directly, the implied thesis of his book, that "material dynamics" are the "real effects" of which the idea of inspiration is an imperfect metaphor, demonstrates the basis of the modern critical attitude towards Blake. It can be found, less obviously stated, in Northrop Frye, who says that while "[i]t is true that Blake often makes remarks implying an external spiritual agency. . . . But usually the term 'angel' or 'spirit' in Blake . . . means the imagination functioning as inspiration, and the fact that inspiration often takes on a purpose of its own is familiar to every creative artist" (Frye 38). Most modern critics follow Frye in dodging the literalism of Blake's claims to inspiration in favour of psychological readings that interpret the dictation model as an elaborate metaphor for the activities of a psyche more accurately conceived of in biological and material terms. Robert Essick goes so far in the direction of demystifying Blake's theory of inspiration as to suggest that Blake's media, his copperplates and gravers, even the English language itself, were his actual Muses, and that his claims of dictation may be explained by a process in which "[the] independence of media from their creator gives rise to a myth of transcendent origins" (Essick, "Body" 206). "Blake did not have to hear voices to have some of his poetry dictated to him," writes Essick, "He needed only to receive the messages of his medium" (216).

These newer readings of Blake's dictation model share a problematic premise with their predecessors. To explain Blake's visions and voices in terms of the "material dynamics" of composition is in some ways as reductive as dismissing them as brain disorders. Such readings are, in fact, *translations* of the dictation model into the terms of materialist philosophy, terms explicitly rejected by Blake. Philosophical materialism, best exemplified in the writings of Blake's unholy Trinity of Bacon, Newton, and Locke, appears in his poetry as Ulro, "the Satanic Space" (E 147), for "every Natural Effect has a Spiritual Cause, and Not / A Natural: for a Natural Cause only seems, it is a Delusion / Of Ulro: & a ratio of the perishing Vegetable Memory" (E 124). To consider the "material dynamics" of artistic composition as the truth of creativity is to reject the foundation of Blake's own philosophy. For whether or not Blake is right to demonize philosophical materialism, he is consistent in doing so. His poetry is largely an attack on this perspective and all its consequences. The liberation of humanity from "the sleep of Ulro," he says in *Jerusalem*, is the theme that "calls me in sleep night after night, & ev'ry morn / Awakes me at sun-rise" (E 146).

Blake's model of inspiration, then, is unlikely to be usefully reduced to the terms of materialistic psychology or sociology. In claiming to be "secretary" to unseen powers, he is not a psychological empiricist indulging in a quaint primitivist *façon à parler*. It is equally misleading, however, to understand Blake's muses in a conventionally "spiritual" context, for although he spoke of his "spirits" and "angels" so literally as to arouse the pity and scorn of his contemporaries, he also states in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that all spirits and angels originate in the interaction of "the ancient Poets" with "all sensible objects," and that ultimately, therefore, "All deities reside in the human breast" (E 38). It may seem that Blake closes all doors to interpretation; we may not (he says) understand his theory of art materialistically, nor may we do so in the terms of conventional spirituality. Nor, it seems, may we ignore it. Even poststructuralist critics, characteristically cagey about metaphysical stances, have recognized the centrality of the dictation model to our understanding of Blake. Indeed, Molly Anne Rothenberg has argued that the *incoherence* of the dictation model is the key to Blake's poetics. The paradox of poetry with no clear author becomes, in her reading, the foundation of a Blakean post-structuralism, the creation of "undecidable questions of authority" (Rothenberg 11). "At the very least," she states, "in the first twenty lines of [*Jerusalem*], we do not know who the narrative voice is, whether the narrator claims responsibility for the poem or not, or whether the agency of the poem actually has any authority whatsoever" (11).

At this point, we might observe that another of the dictation model's most remarkable features is that Blake seems to have expected it to be understood by his contemporaries. Blake was angered by the imputations of insanity his claims of inspiration provoked, and vacillated between regarding them as manifestations of stupidity ("Thou callst me Madman but I call thee Blockhead," he snaps at Flaxman) and of envy ("those with whom I have Contended in Art have strove not to Excell but to Starve me out by Calumny" [E 507, 577]). Neither does it seem likely that he wanted to create an intentionally chaotic narrative structure to subvert ideas of poetic authority, as Rothenberg suggests. Blake's antipathy to formlessness and chaos is well-known, and the commanding authority of the "Inspired Man" is a motif of Blake's art and life. Blake saw himself as a divinely guided prophet and educator, following in the authoritative tradition of "the wisest of the Ancients," as he explained in the August 1799 letter to Trusler (E 702), and revering Jesus, who "spoke with authority, not like a Scribe" (E 519) as the human ideal. Blake's famous defense of obscurity ("That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care") is not a defence of incoherence, but rather an assertion that he considers "what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act" (E 702). In short, Blake aimed to instruct, and intended that his work be challenging but comprehensible to contemporary readers. The dictation model, so fundamental to his theory of his art and so prominent in the poems themselves, must also be comprehensible.

How, then, did Blake intend the dictation model to be understood? Our best hope of an answer lies in the defense and explication of the model we find in "To the Public." Blake seems to have foreseen that this model would be a major obstacle to *Jerusalem*'s acceptance for the reason that the poem is his first public assumption of the mantle of a Christian prophet. His spiritual dictation no longer originates with an anonymous fairy or angel, or a fictional-sounding group like the Daughters of Beulah, but with Jesus Christ, "the Saviour," whom the poet sees every morning at sunrise, "dictating the words of this mild song." To a contemporary ear, this is familiar language, that of Richard Brothers and Johanna Southcott. Had Blake been content with the sort of following enjoyed by Brothers or Southcott, he might have succeeded as a kind of public prophet, but as "To the Public" indicates, *Jerusalem* was intended for a very different audience. Blake's friendly appeals to his "[*Dear*] Reader" and hopeful expectations that the book will be "kindly received" are conventions of genteel literary culture, and suggest a genuine desire to penetrate this culture and find acceptance there (E 146). Blake wants *Jerusalem* to be recognized as literature, not as a specimen of London street religion.

In this respect it is worth noting some differences between "To the Public" and the Preface to *Milton*. In the earlier poem, Blake's tone is defiant, even overtly prophetic. He repudiates the established cultural sphere in its entirety, dismissing the Greek and Roman classics as "Stolen and Perverted," and "set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible" (E 95). Church and state are staffed by "ignorant Hirelings," while the commercial art world is dominated by wealthy, "fash[i]onable fools" who promote "contemptible works" with "expensive advertizing boasts" (E 95). In *Milton*, Blake seeks to bypass the traditional audience for poetry (composed largely of these "hirelings" and "fools") in favour of a hypothetical class of uncorrupted young artists, the "Young Men of the New Age" (E 95). The dates of composition of Blake's two completed epics remain uncertain (see Erdman's discussion [Erdman, "Textual Notes" 806-809]), but *Jerusalem* seems to have been largely composed after *Milton*, even though both frontispieces are dated 1804. This chronology may account for differences in the two introductions. If the Preface to *Milton* shares something of the unabashed enthusiasm (in both senses of the word) of the Felpham period, "To the Public" seems to share the more conciliatory tenor of the *Descriptive Catalogue* and the other prose essays written in the years surrounding the failed exhibition of 1809. These later works are attempts to gain acceptance with the established consumer public he defied in his earlier work. Behind this change is what seems to be a change in Blake's perception of the reading public. The Preface to *Milton* calls on the "Young Men of the New Age" to wage "Spiritual War" against the "Hirelings" and "fools" who, as Blake was acutely aware, constituted the major market for art and literature. In contrast, the *Catalogue*, the *Public Address*, and "To the Public" imagine the cultural marketplace as populated by two groups, a self-seeking cabal of art dealers, political authorities, and talentless commercial artists, and a public whose true tastes coincide with Blake's, but which has been deceived into adopting the false tastes promulgated by what Morris Eaves has memorably called a "Counter-Arts Conspiracy." The aim of the conspirators is to encourage a public taste for genres and styles friendly to state power and susceptible to easy mass-production, and to promote theories of art that justify these genres and styles. These "Arts of Trading Combination" (E 577) work to keep Blake's competing style and theories "hidden" from the public "by Artifices" (E 538). These "artifices" range from slander (that Blake was a mediocre engraver, for instance) to the promulgation of false theories of art (such as Reynolds' neoclassical theories). Blake felt that consumers of art had been confused by these tricks to such a degree that public taste had become meaningless as a guide to artistic quality ("Call that the Public Voice which is their Error," he writes in *Public Address* [E 578]). As Morris Eaves points out, this critique of the artistic-literary world followed a tradition of nationalistic art theory exemplified notably by James Barry and (ironically) Sir Joshua Reynolds. The characteristic rhetorical tone of this "English school" movement was pedagogical; a taste for foreign styles in painting and engraving was interfering with the appreciation of domestically produced art, and the consuming public (i.e., the wealthier classes) needed to be re-educated before English talent could flourish. Blake's endeavour to legitimize *Jerusalem* in the eyes of the genteel reading public places him squarely in this tradition. Shifting from conciliation to prophecy to pedagogy, "To the Public" embodies the contradictions inherent in the English school's conception of the consuming public as at once superior (in wealth and standing to middle-class artist-theorists), inferior (in knowledge of true principles of art), and equal (in a potential shared appreciation of the truth). As Eaves observes,

> At one extreme, this rhetoric modulates into one that might be called prophetic, as an inferior class issues dire warnings to its superiors . . . however [these tendencies] overlap and compete with a bourgeois version in which the object is to have one member of the class supply knowledge and taste to others of the same class in a kind of self-improvement exercise, as one might turn out for Coleridge's or Hazlitt's lectures. (Eaves, *Conspiracy* 171)

In "To the Public" and the prose essays, Blake's tone has changed from that of a revolutionary to that of a reformer. Blake wants to reshape the commercial artistic-literary world from within, by driving out false taste with true. Like *Public Address* and the *Descriptive Catalogue*, the introduction to *Jerusalem* is "a classical commercial initiative of the English school, a project presented as a remedy for the state of English art" (157). That said, we must recognize that Blake's somewhat paranoid version of English-school theory is unusual enough to be an "unauthorized variant" (157), an "organized extension of the conspiratorial strains of English-school discourse" (159), as Eaves notes. We might, indeed, go farther. Blake's more expansive theory of the "Counter Arts" (E 580) in painting and engraving includes the Englishman Reynolds as a member of the conspiracy, just as his larger critique of cultural history targets major English cultural icons like Bacon, Newton and Locke. The attacks on false and foreign styles of engraving in *Public Address* are part of an aggressive Blakean discourse of artistic reform encompassing attacks on the Venetian and Flemish schools of painting in the *Descriptive Catalogue,* the annotations to Reynolds' *Works*, and the criticisms of Augustan verse scattered throughout Blake's writings. The English-school strain of Blake's thought is better understood as the nationalistic, commercial aspect of his broader analysis of the universal enslavement of the human imagination. The "Counter Arts" in their entirety include anything interfering with true art as Blake envisions it.

In "To the Public," the Counter Arts take the form of a literary aesthetic that would (and did) assign *Jerusalem* the legitimacy of a Ranter street pamphlet. To forestall this response and win credibility as a *literary* writer, Blake tries to redefine a key term of eighteenth-century psychological discourse. It was a paradoxical quality of late

Augustanism that widespread acceptance of proto-Romantic theories of primitivist inspiration did little to affect attitudes towards Christian religious enthusiasm. The critics of enthusiasm, in the aftermath of the Civil Wars, had been prominent and influential, and their influence was lasting. Hobbes and Swift had both written against enthusiasm, but its most powerful enemy was Locke. Locke did not deny the existence of divine revelation, but he was deeply suspicious of anyone claiming to receive such revelations in the post-Biblical world. The *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) describes religious enthusiasm as a kind of mental dysfunction, "the conceits of a warmed and over-weening brain" (Locke 128). Enthusiasm stems from the "love of something extraordinary, the ease and glory it is to be inspired, and to be above the common and natural ways of knowledge . . . [which] flatters many men's laziness, ignorance, and vanity" (128). Only reason can determine the validity of revelation, and those who refuse to submit religious feeling to rational scrutiny demonstrate their mental and moral weakness. "*Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything*," he concludes (133, emphasis in original).

From this perspective, Blake was the very definition of a deranged enthusiast. His bold assertions that "Self Evident Truth is one Thing and Truth the result of Reasoning is another Thing," that "Rational Truth is not the Truth of Christ but of Pilate" (E 621), might almost be taken directly from Locke's description of the victims of enthusiasm:

> Reason is lost upon them, they are above it: they see the light infused into their

> understandings, and cannot be mistaken; it is clear and visible there, like the light of bright sunshine, shows itself, and needs no other proof but its own evidence. (Locke 129)

To his contemporaries, Blake must have seemed a textbook case. Blake was, of course, aware of Locke's argument, and although his annotated copy of the *Essay* has been lost, his reaction is recorded throughout his work. His rejection of Locke was partly founded on the conviction that Locke's attempt to force revelation's submission to reason is refuted by the facts Blake defends in "There Is No Natural Religion," that "Reason or the ratio of all we have already known. is not the same as it shall be when we know more," and that therefore, "If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character. the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things & stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again" (E 3). In other words, argues Blake, if there is no self-evident knowledge, there is no knowledge at all. Self-evident knowledge is the foundation of any "ratio," including those of institutional Christianity and Locke's own *Essay*, which frequently invokes self-evident truth and "intuitive certainty" (Locke 100) in defense of its fundamental ideas.[1] Without what Locke and his followers call "enthusiasm," there would be no culture, no religion, no philosophy, no material at all upon which Reason might operate; the mill of Reason would be shut down, empty of raw materials. "Meer Enthusiasm is the All in All!" as Blake wrote in his marginalia to Reynolds (E 645).

---

[1] See Locke's proof of the existence of "ideas," for instance, on the grounds that they are immediately obvious to everyone (Locke 9), or his proof of God's existence, based on the "intuitive certainty" that "Nothing cannot produce a Being" (100).

The first part of "To the Public" is not, however, a philosophical attack on Lockean rationalism, despite the rough treatment Locke receives in the body of *Jerusalem*. In this introductory passage, Blake instead reasons with his audience on its own terms. Rather than attacking the "Counter Arts" directly, his goal is to create a new model of Christian prophecy with a firm basis in accepted cultural theory:

> The Enthusiasm of the following Poem the Author hopes [*no Reader will think presumptuousness or arrogance when he is reminded that the Ancients acknowledge their love to their Deities, to the full as Enthusiastically as I have who Acknowledge mine for my Saviour and Lord, for they were wholly absorb'd in their Gods*.] (E 145, passages in italics later deleted)

Blake here appeals directly to the principles of primitivist aesthetics, asking his readers to interpret Christian "enthusiasm" as a form of primitive *enthusiasmos*, what Lowth calls the "singular frenzy of poets." Blake clearly feels that this argument is unexceptionable, and indeed, it is not without precedent. Lowth suggests much the same thing in the course of his comparison of the oral bases of Greek and Hebrew poetry. Blake is simply pursuing the implications of Lowth's belief that "if the actual origin of Poetry be inquired after, it must of necessity be referred to Religion" (Lowth 37). In its purest form, poetry is the spontaneous expression of religious enthusiasm, and it stands to reason that in a Christian age, Jesus would become a Muse. As the ancient "Deities" spoke to Homer and Hesiod, so Blake "pretend[s] to love, to see, to converse with daily, as man with man, & the more to have an interest in the Friend of Sinners" (E 145).

Blake's defense of the dictation model thus takes the form of an argument from well-established cultural theories. He seems to expect his readers to find this reasonable, but he was to learn (if he did not already know) that few of his contemporaries were willing to follow primitivist aesthetics to their logical conclusion that Hebrew and pagan inspiration were the same phenomenon, and that therefore, "Christianity is art" (E 274). Lowth, the theorist who most directly confronts Christianity's beginnings in primitive poetry, rejects this possibility outright. Hebrew poetry alone, he argues, can lay authentic claim to divinity. Greek theories of the divine origin of poetry were "most groundless and absurd," although "truly and justly applicable to that of the Hebrews" (Lowth 49). Hebrew poetry "alone is deserving of the name" of divine, and "boasts of a much higher origin" than its pagan counterpart (366-7). It is crucial to his thesis that pagan and Hebrew enthusiasm are *outwardly* identical, since his case for the oral nature of early Hebrew poetry relies on analogies with Greek cultural history. But Lowth dismisses without further argument the possibility that they might be identical in essential nature. Any genuine inspiration contained in pagan religious poetry is a residue of a forgotten Hebrew origin, although the degree to which this is true "appears a question of little importance" (49). The matter needs no discussion: what is not Hebrew-Christian is *a priori* not divine in origin. Despite his enthusiasm for enthusiasm, Lowth's approach to inspiration is fundamentally Lockean, privileging what Blake calls in his annotations to Bacon "Lame Reasoning upon Premises" (E 622) over the self-evident truth that "The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nations different reception of the Poetic Genius which is every where call'd the Spirit of Prophecy" (E 1). The subordination of revelation to reason tended to neutralize the universalist implications of primitivism, since rational evaluation of religious matters, as Lowth demonstrated, was largely a matter of applying established Church doctrine.

Blake's argument that Christian enthusiasm was artistically legitimate faced yet another obstacle. The latitudinarianism of the eighteenth century, reflected in the immense popularity of Tillotson's seventeenth-century anti-Puritan sermons, condemned enthusiasm as the religion of the vulgar and unlearned, synonymous with fanaticism and violence. As the Archbishop of Canterbury instructed the newly consecrated first Bishop of Calcutta, "Remember, my Lord Bishop, that your Primate on the day of your consecration defined your duty for you: – that duty is to put down enthusiasm and preach the Gospel" (qtd. in Davies 12). The growth of this doctrine's influence coincided with the rise of primitivistic aesthetic values, and had the effect of preventing them from spilling into the realm of genteel Christianity. The eighteenth-century reader was quite capable of admiring pagan or Hebrew enthusiasm from a distance of centuries, and of condemning the same enthusiasm when it appeared among his servants as Methodism, or in the guise of polite literature as *Jerusalem.* Justification for these feelings was easily found in the same progressive theories of history that spawned primitivist aesthetics. Enthusiasm was properly a feature of *primitive* society, and most would have agreed with Blair that with the passage of time, "the understanding has gained ground on the fancy and imagination" (Blair, *Lectures* 157), and that whatever damage had been done to poetry, the overall effect on society was beneficial. Contemporary outbreaks of enthusiasm were regarded as atavistic, "mortifying proof that the world is not making such advances in knowledge, as some benevolent philosophers would have us believe," as a writer for the *Analytical Review* said of Richard Brothers' following ("Sound Argument" 318).

The primitivist case for the artistic legitimacy of the dictation model was therefore crippled by its own consistency. Poor public response to *Jerusalem*, in spite of Thomas Wainewright's extravagant "puff" in the *London Magazine,* suggests that the model's literary orthodoxy could not overcome its religious heterodoxy. Blake's intended reading public was unable to reconcile *Jerusalem*'s purported mode of composition with their conviction that naked enthusiasm for the Christian Deity had been superseded, in a rational age, by intellectual appreciation of his natural works. Southey's characterization of the poem as "perfectly mad" is probably a representative example of audience response (qtd. in Ackroyd 295). The failure of the argument of "To the Public" suggests a reason for *Jerusalem*'s unfinished state. Many of the deletions on this plate suggest that Blake had lost faith in his readership. His imagined reader is no longer a "lover of books" and "lover of heaven"; the first word is stricken from both phrases (E 145). The passage expressing hope that no reader will think the poem's enthusiasm presumptuous or arrogant is also crossed out, as is the "dear" in "[*Dear*] Reader" (E 145). It seems no coincidence that *Jerusalem* was Blake's last serious attempt to achieve public recognition as a poet.

The Idea of Dictation

Readers willing to look beyond the dictation model's unrepentant enthusiasm would find that it explores other implications of primitivist theory. The essence of dictation is that it combines orality and literacy in one operation, with orality in the primary, creative role. This foregrounding of orality is consistent with a primitivist understanding of the model, since enthusiasm was considered the normal psychological mode of primitive oral cultures. The equation *enthusiasm=orality= good poetry* was an explicit premise of eighteenth-century historical criticism. Blake and his readership would have had ample experience of dictation's two-part nature, since dictation was a common practice in his day as it had been for centuries. Cicero, in the first century before Christ, observes that it was rare and flattering in his time to receive a letter actually written by the sender, dictation being so usual (Murphy 143). Two millennia later, Blake himself was taking Hayley's dictation, transcribing translations from Tasso (Ackroyd 228). The personal amanuensis, professional or charitable (the blind Milton dictating to his daughters appears in *Milton* [E 110]), was a familiar figure in eighteenth-century England, and in calling himself a mere secretary to divine powers, Blake clothes divinity, as he often does, in the colours of the everyday.

The short poem in the middle of "To the Public" reveals in what concrete terms Blake imagined spiritual dictation, and how clearly he conceived it as a bridge between orality and literacy. This poem imagines the compositional process as outwardly structured by the demands of literate culture, but inwardly powered by oral energies that transcend and transform the mundane world of commercial print. It begins with an address to Blake's reader, presumed to be a "lover of books," and "of that God from whom [*all books are given*]" (E 145, passage in italics later deleted). The book, central artifact of print culture, is presented as nothing less than a gift of God, "Who in mysterious Sinais awful cave/ To Man the wond'rous art of writing gave" (E 145). Blake here repeats the eighteenth-century theory that alphabetic writing was given to mankind when God engraved the Ten Commandments on the stones of Sinai. This earliest and holiest writing, however, is *oral* in origin. The words on the first set of tablets, later destroyed, are spoken aloud by God before being recorded with his own finger (Exodus 31:18). The second set of tablets are dictated directly to Moses (Exodus 34:27-28). Having established that at its very creation, writing was spiritual dictation, Blake proclaims himself God's newest amanuensis, for "Again he speaks in thunder and in fire!" (E 145). Like that of Moses, Blake's revelation is emphatically oral: "Even from the depths of Hell his voice I hear, / Within the unfathomed caverns of my Ear" (E 145). The thundering speech of God is the original text of *Jerusalem*, and the shift from prose to rhyme in this section manifests this oral energy and vitality. "Therefore I print," concludes Blake, "nor vain my types shall be: / Heaven, Earth & Hell, henceforth shall live in harmony" (E 145). The language of commercial printing completes the poem's circular movement and re-establishes Blake's relationship with his audience on a literate basis. As Moses brought engraved tablets down from Sinai to establish harmony between God and the Israelites, Blake will bring engraved plates to his English Israelites ("Oxford Street is in Jerusalem," Southey complained [Ackroyd 313]) for the same purpose. The art of printing, mechanized extension of the God-given "wond'rous art of writing," will enable Blake's revelation to reach the farthest corners of the world, bringing "Heaven, Earth & Hell" into a new harmony. The poem thus presents a complete model of poetic production, a working primitivism for an age of commercial print. God dictates, the poet-amanuensis records and prints. Orality, writing and print each play an essential role in the promulgation of divine truth. The present and past are also reconciled, as the inspired enthusiasm supposedly lost since the advent of literacy is reborn in present-day Christianity. The dictation model represents a characteristically Blakean marriage that preserves the identity of each of its parts, while uniting them in a single function of the highest utility.

Dictation, Phase I: "He Speaks in Thunder and Fire"

From the example of the above poem, we can see that the purpose of the dictation model is the preservation of orality in a literate environment. Dictation is, of course, only possible in a literate society, and represents a division of labour of the kind Brown and Ferguson considered characteristic of literate societies. Brown, in particular, considered literacy to be the foundation of *all* division of labour. By virtue of this division, dictation is able to preserve audible orality (as opposed to an attenuated, "inner" orality) as part of writing, and generally the purpose of dictation is to take advantage of this division of labour, to free the orator from the vexations of writing so that he can reap the creative benefits of oral composition. This was no doubt especially true in an age of quill and ink. The dictator tries to ride the natural flow of speech, to borrow creative energy for his "writing" from the spontaneity of orality. That this was the purpose of dictation appears as early as the *Institutio Oratoria* of Quintilian, who disapproves of the practice for this very reason. Quintilian paints a vivid picture of the dictator carried away by the spontaneity of orality, indulging in "those gestures which accompany the stronger excitements of the mind, and which, in some degree, rouse the imagination, such as waving of the hand, alteration of the features, turning from side to side, and all such acts"

(Quintilian 143). The heightened emotional state of the dictator (as compared to that of the solitary writer) leads to carelessness in composition, Quintilian argues, "for in the use of the pen, the hand of the writer, however rapid, as it cannot keep pace with the celerity of his thoughts, allows them some respite" (143). The presence of an audience (the amanuensis) only exacerbates the problem, making the dictator reluctant to hesitate or correct himself for fear of being thought weak. The results of dictation are "expressions that partake neither of the accuracy of the writer, nor of the animation of the speaker" (143).

Eighteenth-century theoreticians of orality had little to say about dictation *per se*, but they took a much more positive view of oral composition than did Quintilian. This view found one of its most extreme and influential expressions in the elocutionary doctrine of Thomas Sheridan. Like most of his contemporaries, Sheridan felt he lived in an age of artistic decline associated with the decay of primary orality and the rise of print technology. His *Lectures on Elocution* (1762) open with the assertion "That a general inability to read, or speak with propriety and grace in public, runs thro' the natives of the British dominions, is acknowledged" (Sheridan 1). The source of the problem is the spread of writing and print, which destroy our natural sensitivity to language, partly by dissociating words from their natural sounds, and partly by fostering the creation of an artificial "book language" of abstract terms that have no connection to natural human sentiments (175). Sheridan gave this familiar-sounding argument a pedagogical turn by combining it with classical rhetorical theory. A rhetorician and teacher of oratory, Sheridan considered the oratorical culture of ancient Greece to be greatly superior to the literate culture of his own age. The conviction that attention to orality was the basis of this superiority led Sheridan to abandon most of the technical apparatus of classical rhetoric, and to elevate *delivery* (the techniques of oral performance) above all other elements of rhetorical theory. Such an emphasis on performance was not unprecedented in the history of rhetoric. George Kennedy has observed that classical thinking about rhetoric can be divided into two streams, sophistic and philosophical (Kennedy 14), the first of which emphasizes the explicitly oratorical elements of rhetoric over matters of structure, invention, or logic. Sheridan found further support for the sophistic point of view in eighteenth-century empirical psychology with its sensationalist basis (the spirit of oratory, he states, is to "speak entirely from [the] feelings" [121]). Reading history in the light of primitivist theories, he concluded that in the heyday of oral culture, rhetoric had been nothing more than the systematic study and practice of oral enthusiasm. On this basis, Sheridan expanded the sophistic perspective into dogma. He considered oratory the most profound, all-embracing form of art:

> All the highest delights arising from the exertions of man's nobler faculties, are comprised in the single article of a just and graceful elocution: and all the powers of the fancy, all the feelings of the heart, as well as the most animated efforts of the understanding, are to be exercised so as to attain their full strength, and shaped so as to obtain their perfect beauty, by that alone. . . . (Sheridan 176)

Sheridan's "just and graceful" orator does not compose on paper with minute care and reflection, as Quintilian suggests. Instead, the first rule of public speaking is that the orator "forget that he ever learned to read" (121). The orator composes on his feet, allowing the feelings to find spontaneous oral expression, for "they will find much truer signs to manifest themselves by, than he could find for them" (121). From the point of view of the history of rhetoric, Sheridan's ideas were extreme, but they were embraced by an intellectual culture predisposed to imagine its deficiencies as stemming from cultural progress and the rise of literacy. His ideas won a wide audience and became the foundation of a broadly influential movement that lasted into the early twentieth century.

The prominence of orality in Blake's theory of composition invites comparisons with Sheridan. The latter part of "To the Public," sub-titled "Of the Measure, in which the following Poem is written," is particularly suggestive in this respect. After claiming that *Jerusalem* was "dictated" to him, Blake here defends the poem's unorthodox meter by calling himself a "true Orator" in whose "mouth" blank verse would be monotonous and awkward (E 145-6). In describing himself an "orator" rather than a bard or prophet, Blake again links his Christian enthusiasm to pagan tradition, but now his models are Demosthenes and Cicero, not Homer and Hesiod. This suggests that Blake, like Sheridan, saw the oratorical tradition as genuinely primitivistic. Indeed, prominent rhetoricians like George Campbell continued to classify poetry as "one mode of oratory" throughout the eighteenth century (Campbell 25). Blake's discussion of his activities as an "orator" indicate that he preferred Sheridan's model of oratorical composition to Quintilian's more cautious approach. For Blake, performance *is* composition; the orator-poet chooses his words by their auditory "feel." Words are memorably described as substances that feel comfortable or awkward in his mouth. This mode of composition guides Blake to a rejection of contemporary artistic forms (blank verse, the "modern bondage of Rhyming" [E 146]) in favour of a more spontaneous style in which form is organically linked to emotion, and "the terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts – the mild & gentle, for the mild & gentle parts, and the prosaic, for inferior parts" (E 146). Blake's capsule criticism of the "Monotonous Cadence" of English poetry (E 145) reads like an energetic, somewhat rough translation of Sheridan. Comparing modern poets to the ancient Greeks, Sheridan complains that the overly literate moderns

> write . . . in much the same kind of numbers, whatever be the subject. Instead of variety and expression, melody and smoothness are chiefly attended to both in their periods and verses, by those who are most in vogue. This produces an uniformity, which in any long work becomes insupportable to the ear, and of course wearies attention. (Sheridan 165-6)

The Greeks, on the other hand, who "[e]mployed their chief care and attention about their living tongue" (163) rather than their written language, "always suited their numbers to their subject; and arranged the words in such a way in metre, as might give the most forcible expression to their sentiments" (165). Blake describes himself as following the same method and the same theory of composition as that attributed by Sheridan to the ancient Greeks. For both men, the "true Orator" *is* the true poet, while the implied false orators are the false poets, purveyors of a standardized monotony in the guise of poetry.

An obscure notebook poem contains a picture of one of these false orators:

> I askd my Dear Friend Orator Prigg
> Whats the first part of Oratory he said a great wig

And what is the second then dancing a jig
And bowing profoundly he said a great wig
And what is the third then he snord like a pig
And puffing his cheeks he replied a Great wig (E 515)

Perhaps the most significant thing about Orator Prigg is that his explanation of oratory never actually mentions *speaking*. For him, oratory consists of only one thing, an appearance of wealth and gentility, epitomized by the ownership of a "great wig." If one is rich and fashionable, whatever one says, apparently, is oratory. This dancing, bowing, puffing caricature stands in sharp contrast to Blake's self-portrait as a "true Orator," liberator of poetry and mankind alike. Since Blake considers the true poet to be identical to the true orator, we may surmise that the genteel (and no doubt moralistic) Orator Prigg, who defines oratory without any apparent awareness of its prophetic, primal essence, is a satirical image of the contemporary poet, perhaps on the model of Hayley, who "Pesterd" Blake with his "Genteel Ignorance & Polite Disapprobation," as he reported in a letter to Butts (E 731). David Erdman believes that the "Orator Prigg" poem is a fragment of a larger lost or unfinished poem about the painter James Barry (Erdman 872), which again suggests that "oratory" in this context refers to what we would call poetry. Blake often spoke of poetry and painting together ("I regard Fashion in Poetry as little as I do in Painting" (E 731)), and since the second surviving stanza portrays a "Great Panter" who considers the totality of painting to lie in the ownership of a "pant brush," the parallel with an orator-poet who considers the totality of poetry to lie in superficial externalities is consistent (E 515). The sharpness of Blake's portrait of Orator Prigg comes from the same source as his anger over the fate of Barry: a belief that false art was choking out true art. As Blake bitterly comments in his annotations to Reynolds, Barry "Lived on Bread & Apples," while painting the *Progress of Human Culture* murals for the Society for the Arts, "A Society Composed of the Flower of the English Nobility & Gentry – Suffering an Artist to Starve while he Supported Really what They under pretence of Encouraging were Endeavouring to Depress" (E 636). The proliferation of Orator Priggs has a similar effect on poetry: "The Enquiry in England is not whether a Man has Talents. & Genius But whether he is Passive & Polite & a Virtuous Ass: & obedient to Noblemens Opinions in Art & Science. If he is; he is a Good Man: If Not he must be Starved" (E 642).

The cure for corrupt oratory and its attendant false art is a return to orality. But for both Blake and Sheridan, "true Orators" are rare figures. Blake's sweeping condemnation of blank verse and rhyme targets almost every major poet in the English tradition, including Milton and Shakespeare, both of whom are mentioned by name (E 145). Sheridan, too, is dismayed at the state of English orality. The movement away from oral composition has produced a nation of bad speakers typified by a "disagreeable monotony" of delivery which "in such as have any taste . . . must occasion the highest disgust" (17). Sheridan is explicit in blaming this situation on the rise of literacy, but Blake has little to say about the origins of false oratory, at least in these passages. Nevertheless, he hints that the faults of these would-be orators are associated with books and writing. Blake does not call these blank-verse writers and rhymers poets, orators, or even dictation-takers, but rather "writers of English verse" (145). At first glance this seems innocent enough, but not once in his surviving works does Blake refer to himself as a "writer," preferring primitivist terms like prophet, poet, orator, or at most, a "Secretary" (E 730) whose job is to take oral dictation. It is quite possible, even likely, that Blake is sarcastically implying that poets who are "writers of verse" are missing the fact that poetry is essentially an oral form. One "chaunt[s]"heroic verse like *Jerusalem* (E 206); one sings it, orates it, or records it from an oral source. One certainly doesn't *write* it.

Sheridan does not believe the decay of orality (and of poetry) is irreversible; his prescription is a revival of the art of oratory. Rhetoric and elocution are to be the core subjects of a reformed educational system modelled after that of the ancient Greeks and Romans. "If we open the fountain of oratory, which was closed up by barbarism," he says, "the arts will once more necessarily flow from it in their natural channels" (179). "To the Public" indicates that Blake, too, saw "the fountain of oratory" as nothing less than the spring from which an entire poetic renaissance might flow. "Poetry Fetter'd, Fetters the Human Race!" (E 146) writes Blake, suggesting that the "monotonous" poetry of the false orators is a poetry in chains, an art form hobbled by the standardized prosody of "writers" of verse. That he considered his own liberated art to be superior to these "fetter'd" epics of the past is clear from his description of *Milton* as "the Grandest Poem that This World Contains" (E 730). Blake felt his own poetry to be the first breath of a renaissance, "the grand style of Art restored," as he said of his painting (E 528), and as "fresco" and line are the hallmarks of his visual art, revitalized orality is the hallmark of his unfettered verse. Oratory is the cure for the epidemic of poetic insipidity that Blake condemned (and, ironically, exemplified) as early as "To the Muses" in *Poetical Sketches.* Alicia Ostriker points out that Blake looked to the "bards of old" (E 417) mentioned in this poem (or what he thought were such) for oratorical models: "the immediate inspiration for Blake's septenary was probably the prose-poetry of Macpherson's *Ossian*" (Ostriker 125). Blake had been intrigued by Macpherson from his youth, and as we know, regarded the Ossian poems as genuine specimens of primitive poetry. On some level, however, he may have recognized the poems' modern qualities, for Ostriker notes that, metrically, "Blake was never so bland as Macpherson" (126). The rugged lines of *Jerusalem* have a variety and vitality the Ossian poems rarely match. Even so, imitation of Ossian, especially in the matter of line length, is "one of the chief devices by which Blake keeps his distance from the 'monotonous cadence' of normal verse" (126). Blake found another powerful model of ancient oratory in the Bible, although its prosodic influence was necessarily limited by the fact that the King James Bible translates the original Hebrew poetry into Jacobean prose. (The question of the original nature of Hebrew verse was "uncommonly difficult and obscure," says Lowth, who makes it plain that he would have liked to avoid the issue entirely [Lowth 55-6]).

The renewal of prosody is only a beginning, however, for Blake extends his argument against the false orators by claiming that their poetry "Fetters the Human Race!" (E 146). Poetry, in the broadest sense, can certainly be seen (and often is, by Blake) as one of the fullest expressions of the creative imagination, and its fettering, considered in these terms, might well have enormous cultural and psychological implications. This broader fettering of the imagination is one of Blake's major themes as a poet. But Blake makes these particular remarks in the course of a discusion of poetic meter, not poetic theme. His somewhat extravagant claim is that a fashion for blank verse is a significant restriction on human freedom. It is possible, of course, that Blake is simply expressing a truism, that constraining art constrains human creativity, by definition. A more substantial reading is possible, however. Ostriker observes that "the positivist, moralizing eighteenth century often linked correct prosody with correct rules of conduct, presuming that regularity of stress not only reflected regularity of character in the poet, but by Lockean association tended to instill the same in the reader" (Ostriker 19). The regularity of blank verse and rhyme, seen from this point of view, mirrors the well-ordered rationalist mind of the writer, and foster the development of a similar mind in the reader. Samuel Johnson considered it a virtue of such strictly regulated verse that it "shackles attention, and governs passions" (qtd. in Ostriker 19). For Blake, such an associative effect would obviously be a genuine fettering of human potential, and Ostriker argues that Blake's liberated verse was motivated, to some degree, by a desire to undermine the Augustan tradition of rational elegance (19). Blake's comment in *Public Address* seems to confirm this hypothesis: "I do not condemn Pope or Dryden because they did not understand Imagination but because they did not understand Verse" (E 575).

Sheridan suggests yet another way the poetry of false oratory might bind the psyche. The decline of oratory causes moral and social degeneration, he argues. "[N]othing can contribute more to the propagation of selfishness in this country," says Sheridan, "than the ascendancy which the written language has obtained amongst us, over that which is spoken" (181). Sheridan here follows the tradition of sophistic rhetoric, in which the "praise of the orator" is an important theme. As George Kennedy observes, this mode of rhetorical thinking not only "emphasizes the speaker rather than the speech or audience," but "is responsible for the image of the ideal orator leading society to noble ideals" (Kennedy 14). Originating with the Greek sophists, this image is refined by

Cicero, and in Quintilian, becomes the fundamental principle of rhetoric. "We are to form then, the perfect orator," Quintilian says at the beginning of the *Institutio*, "who cannot exist unless he is above all a good man" (Quintilian 6). Sheridan was by no means alone in repeating this argument. For Hugh Blair, "a good heart" was as important to an orator as a good mind or education (Blair, *Lectures* 29). Campbell argues the same, on more practical grounds, "for to be good is the only sure way of being long esteemed good, and to be esteemed good is previously necessary to one's being heard with due attention and regard" (Campbell 129). Sheridan is unusual, however, in locating the *source* of the orator's goodness in orality itself, rather than in a set of moral principles that inform oratorical performance. Writing is destructive of morality, in this view, because it undermines natural social bonds by weakening our ability to communicate face-to-face. This cause and effect relationship is difficult to see, because writing, by divorcing language from gesture and vocal expressiveness, encourages us to think that abstract signs can carry the full burden of emotional meaning. In fact, the dissociated language of the highly literate, "the mere language of ideas," as Sheridan calls it, "can itself contain, no other power, but that of conveying knowledge, and improving the understanding" (181-2). But "the understanding, tho' it be the first, is not the only part of the mind," he notes, for "the fancy and the passions occupy a large part of it" (176). For communication in its fullest form to occur, a second language, "the language of the emotions," (i.e. gesture, tone, volume, and emphasis) must be added to the language of ideas (182). If these two languages are not properly united when we speak, our performance will be either monotonously dull, or irrational and absurd. On the other hand, if ideas and delivery are harmoniously matched, our speech is both comprehensible and pleasant to the ear. Natural sympathy is awakened, and the social passions are strengthened and encouraged. "Such an intercourse, frequently repeated," Sheridan concludes, "tends to eradicate all selfish passions" (183). The argument might be summed up as: orality *is* morality.

For Sheridan, then, the rise of literate English culture fetters not only poetry, but the human heart. This culture must necessarily suffer accusations of backwardness from foreigners, who, Sheridan contends, have more developed and intelligible languages because of a greater attention to the requirements of orality (217-8). "Voltaire proclaims your barbarism through Europe," says Sheridan to his English readers, "and his authority will go a great way, as his writings are more universally read than all of your authors put together" (218). He ends his *Heads of a Plan for the Improvement of Elocution* with an appeal to patriotism:

> If you are a true Englishman, and have the honour and interest of your country at heart, you will throw away this prejudice [against refocusing the nation's education on oratory and elocution], and join in promoting a design to wash off this strong stain of barbarism, which still rests upon this kingdom. (218)

This is not far from Blake's declaration that "Nations are Destroy'd, or Flourish, in proportion as Their Poetry Painting and Music, are Destroy'd or Flourish!" (E 146). If, as Blake writes in the *Descriptive Catalogue*, "England expects that every man should do his duty, in Arts, as well as in Arms, or in the Senate" (E 549), we might conclude that both men feel that the acquisition of a "true Orator"'s eloquence is a patriotic duty. Like the sophistic argument that the true orator is inherently moral, the patriotic argument for artistic reform was not new. In the eighteenth century, however, the latter more commonly had its basis in economics. John Landseer's *Lectures on the Art of Engraving*, delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain starting in 1806, exemplify this point of view. Landseer's goal is to promote the art of engraving, and he does so by contending that artistic skill is a valuable natural resource. Art is a commodity, and nations that produce high-grade art, like nations that produce high-grade steel, have a competitive advantage in international trade. And trade, Landseer argues in typical eighteenth-century fashion, is the foundation of national power and greatness. A similar argument can be found in Blake in the *Edward III* fragment in *Poetical Sketches*, but these lines suggest satiric intent, coming as they do from State and Church (a Duke and a Bishop), in a situation where war is contemplated because "the merchants do complain, and beg our aid," even though they are "rich enough" to help themselves (E 425). Blake seems to have longed for commercial success, but angry distrust of "the Fiends of Commerce" (E 479) is far more characteristic. Not surprisingly, then, his argument in the last lines of "To the Public" is much closer to Sheridan's than to Landseer's. There is no mention of Commerce in Blake's call to national greatness, only an appeal for a return to the "Primeval State of Man," a state of "Wisdom, Art, and Science," of religious enthusiasm and true oratory, the state in which Blake claims to have created *Jerusalem* (E 146). An unfinished notebook poem from roughly the same period explains how such "primeval" art will establish England's preeminence:

> Now Art has lost its mental Charms

France shall subdue the World in Arms
So spoke an Angel at my birth
Then said Descend thou upon Earth
Renew the Arts on Britains Shore
And France shall fall down & adore (E 479)

Blake's argument is essentially that of Sheridan: the products of an oral renaissance will raise England's status among nations by sheer moral and aesthetic authority. For Blake, the power of the spoken word, the power of oratory, is enough even to defeat Napoleon's armies. This is sophistic rhetoric at its most ambitious, a more-than-Ciceronian view of oratory as the ultimate political weapon, capable of dethroning (or in corrupted form, enthroning) tyrants. The "true Orator" is the true patriot, even the true soldier.

Throughout its movement from conciliation to prophetic defiance, "To the Public" remains an attempt to educate the reader by encouraging him to apply widely accepted primitivist theory to the text in front of him. Blake wants his readers to recognize "true oration" when they (paradoxically) read it, and to follow his example in their own poetry for the good of England and the human race. "To the Public" might thus be read as a "lecture on elocution," and the encouragement of orality be understood as part of Blake's larger pedagogical (he would say, prophetic) project. Blake is not usually thought of as a rhetorician, but his ambition to reform poetry by returning it to the status of oratory is very close to Sheridan's primitivistic brand of sophistic rhetoric. And Sheridan, too, was a reformer and educator, author of *British Education* (1756) along with his writings on elocution. He dreamed of founding a model school of rhetoric, and was "repeatedly solicited by many persons of the most distinguished abilities, to draw up a regular plan, for the introduction and establishment of the Art of Elocution" (Sheridan 195). Sheridan's *Lectures on Elocution* and related writings were dedicated to the idea that a return to orality among the literate classes could be achieved with the right kind of education. He declined to attempt the task of drawing up a complete strategy for reform, but he was nevertheless confident a workable plan could be created as "the joint product of the ablest heads" (196), and that a renewal of English culture would follow. In the end, Blake shared this faith, and as strange as it might seem, his model of poetry and the Elocutionary Movement must be considered closely related.

That this idea *does* seem strange is a sign of the important differences between Blake's idea of orality and Sheridan's. English rhetoricians of the eighteenth century operated in the shadow of Locke, and Sheridan was no exception. The starting point for his elocutionary argument is a eulogy of Locke and a review of the argument in Book Three of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that philosophical controversies most frequently stem from improper use of language. Noting that this insight had had lamentably little effect on public affairs in England, Sheridan suggests in *Lectures on Elocution* that the explanation is Locke's failure to note the difference between oral and written language. Only a return to orality can provide the kind of linguistic awareness that Locke proposed England needed. Sheridan thus explicitly presents his elocutionary doctrine as the extension of Lockean philosophy into a practical program for social change.

Sheridan's deep sympathy with Locke (and with the larger project of Enlightenment) is evident in his aspiration to make elocution the foundation of a rational utopia. The study of elocution is the means by which "the passions hurtful or dangerous to society may be repressed," the means by which "the powers of the imagination may be so regulated as to diffuse a general good taste thro' the nation" (Sheridan xi-xii). For all his admiration of spontaneity, Sheridan presents elocution as a process of *regulating* the spontaneous elements of oral performance. Since oral language is an outpouring of the soul's deepest sentiments, the ability to speak effectively proves to be identical with rational self-control. This Lockean faith that "Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything" co-exists uneasily in Sheridan with a conviction that Nature is better left alone than regulated badly, that the "wild orators" of popular Methodism are better elocutionists than the mannered, bookish, Anglican priesthood (128). Nevertheless, his view of Methodism is not very different from Locke's. Methodism represents oratory gone mysteriously bad, the natural energy of spontaneous oral performance somehow failing to shape itself into beautiful, morally improving discourse. Methodism is oratory as *seductress*, "for were they to read their nonsense from notes, in the same cold, artificial manner, that so many of the clergy deliver rational discourses, it is to be presumed, that there are few of mankind, such ideots, as to become their followers" (128). Although Sheridan seems not to notice, his argument that orality is morality founders on this disdain for popular religious enthusiasm; the best, most spontaneous elocutionists in England also happen to be "ideots."

It may be noted that Locke himself distrusted rhetoric for this very reason. Most philosophers and rhetoricians in the classical tradition had argued that rhetoric was at worst a neutral force, equally powerful for good and evil, but Locke took a darker view. He felt that rhetoric was more amenable to the propagation of error than of truth, since

"Wit and Fancy find easier entertainment in the World, than dry Truth and real Knowledge" (Locke 508). Rhetoric was a set of techniques for bypassing the rational mind, a practice fundamentally opposed to philosophy. Its very existence as a discipline irritated Locke. "'Tis evident how much men love to deceive and be deceived," he writes, "since Rhetorick, that powerful instrument of Error and Deceit, has its established Professors, is publickly taught, and has always been in great Reputation" (508). Sheridan's endeavour to make elocution the basis of a Lockean paradise is thus contradictory at its core. If spontaneity is good, it doesn't need to be regulated. If it is amoral, then rational morality must be our true guide, and elocutionary doctrine dissolves into traditional rhetorical theory of Quintilian's type.

Sheridan's problem is, in fact, the familiar dilemma of eighteenth-century primitivism. "Let us be primitive, *but*..." – and this "but" implied everything that was *not* primitive. The renewed primitivism imagined by Sheridan and other would-be reformers of this type was a reasonable, restrained, latitudinarian, *civilized* primitivism. John Brown's *Dissertation* ends on the same note. What England needs, argues Brown, is a strong national institution to *regulate* (that characteristic word of the era) a renewed union of poetry and music. These arts arise from a "natural Flame implanted in the human Breast," but "have a natural Tendency towards *Corruption*" (Brown 241). For Brown, "corruption" means the vulgar energy and questionable morality of popular song (enjoyed by Blake in *An Island in the Moon*). "What then is to be done," he asks, "but to regulate this mighty Stream, which will inevitably run either in the Channel of *Vice* or *Virtue*?" (241). Sheridan and Brown both imagine orality "directed to its proper Ends," and these ends are ultimately identical with the values of the genteel classes (240).

Unlike his more respectable fellow reformers, Blake had no commitment to rationalist philosophy, no fear that natural impulses were a threat to civilized order and morality. Since impulses of the creative imagination were not "natural," but the voices of angels and spirits, they could never be intrinsically evil, and the spontaneous orality of the "true Orator" could safely and legitimately form the basis of true art. Blake did not fear spontaneous impulse; he believed in an innate, universal morality, not located in the natural heart, as Deists believed, but continuously whispered (or thundered) in each individual's spiritual ear by those beings who conduct all our activities, "no less than Digestion or Sleep" (145). Moral knowledge and artistic knowledge are identical, and both are known by "Con or Innate Science" (E 646). For Blake, the problem of primitivist reform was therefore not a matter of *regulating* the energies of oral spontaneity, but rather of finding a way to transfer these energies into the very medium responsible for their decline. He solves the problem by claiming that the literate poet has access to the preliterate state, not in the form of nearby preliterates (children, savages, or rural innocents), or by mere imitation of ancient models, but in the form of spiritual speakers who are always and immediately accessible. Blake's compositional process has as its final goal the production of a written text (in this respect he is typical of Romantic-era primitivist poets, who, rather than seeking to revive a pure oral culture, typically attempted to integrate a revived orality into the existing print culture, e.g. Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*), but while Sheridan saw oratory restoring the greatness of the arts indirectly, by fostering nobility of character and "true taste," Blake envisioned poetry as *recorded oratory*. Literacy does not, as with Sheridan, contain and absorb orality; the two remain separate, working in concert but ultimately divided. Oratory is the fountain of creativity, true prosody and unfettered language, while writing and print serve other purposes entirely.

Dictation, Phase II: The Secretary to Eternity

Since Blake assigns the creative functions of composition to the oral phase of dictation, the written phase is in some ways less theoretically complex. This is evident as early as the dictation model's first appearance in the "Samson" prose poem of *Poetical Sketches*. The narrative voice here asks the Angel of Truth to "guide [his] timorous hand to write as on a lofty rock with iron pens the words of truth, that all who pass may read" (E 443). The fundamental feature of the "guided hand" metaphor is the division between the physical body of the writer (the hand), which produces a material artifact (the written text), and a metaphysical or supernatural "guide" who determines the words the writer's physical hand inscribes. In essence, the writer's physical body is a tool for a spiritual being who is the true creative force behind the prose poem. But why does the spiritual being need the writer's body? The answer is suggested in the quotation's final phrase: the immaterial Angel of Truth is unable to produce physical words "that all who pass may read." The material text created by the writer's body is permanently accessible to a mass audience in a way that the Angel's "words of truth," in their original form, are not. The permanence and accessibility of writing are suggested in Blake's source for the "iron pen" imagery, Job's anguished cry, "Oh that my words were now written! oh that they were printed in a book! That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!" (Job 19:23-24).[1] Job's particular lament in these passages is that his friends and family no longer attend to his *speech*: "I called my servant, and he gave no answer; I intreated him with my mouth. My breath is strange to my wife . . . they whom I loved are turned against me" (Job 19:16-19). Ignored by his family and mocked by his friends, Job nevertheless feels that his situation is significant and deserves to be widely known. The solution is the written word. Through books, Job's story can be known to distant audiences (who, perhaps, are less inclined to judge him) and to posterity. The purpose of writing, then, is to extend the reach of orally composed speech in space and time.

The only controversial element of this utilitarian view of writing is the prominence it gives to orality. However, Blake does not minimize the importance of dictation. This can be seen in his development of the "guided hand" image, which recurs in both of his finished epics. In these later works, Blake emphasizes the interdependence of writing and orality, the relative weakness of each alone. Made anxious by the magnitude of his prophetic task in *Jerusalem*, Blake calls to the Saviour, "Guide thou my hand which trembles exceedingly on the rock of ages" as the poet "write[s] of the building of Golgonooza, and of the terrors of Entuthon" (E 147). The task of recording the Saviour's guidance is vital, so much so that "Trembling I sit day and night . . . rest[ing] not from my great task!" (E 147). This guidance is more clearly oral than the Angel's in "Samson," for only a few lines previously, Blake says that Jesus hovers over him as he writes, "Spreading his beams of love, & dictating the words of this mild song" (E 146). In the "trembling" of the amanuensis, we see the agent of writing portrayed as frail and weak, a suggestion that writing without orality is impotent, incapable of "great tasks" like the creation of *Jerusalem*. The spiritual power of the oral word stabilizes and energizes Blake's physical form even as it uses this form as the vehicle of its material propagation. This image of dictation as a poetically potent fusion of spirit and flesh is even more vivid in *Milton*. Here Blake invokes the Daughters of Beulah, the "Muses who inspire the Poets Song" (E 96). The Muses again speak orally; they are asked to "tell" of the False Tongue, and "say" what moved Milton to journey to Eternal Death (E 96). The wish that "all the Lords people were Prophets" (E 96) can only be realized, however, if Blake's personal, ephemeral oral revelation can be made permanent and public, and so Blake asks the Muses to "Record the journey of immortal Milton thro' your Realms" (E 96), and offers his own body as a tool. "Come into my hand / By your mild power," says Blake, "descending down the Nerves of my right arm /From out the Portals of my Brain" (E 96). In this re-imagining of the primitivist idea of the poet's body becoming charged with the power of oral language, the Muse-speaker's words no longer flow out of the poet's mouth, but out of his hand. For Blake, to be Eternity's amanuensis is to experience the possession of the physical body by spiritual sound, to simultaneously hear and see oral energy manifesting itself in the written word. Each facet of the process is necessary, but inadequate on its own to the "great task" of prophecy as Blake imagines it.

---

[1] An "iron pen" is also mentioned in Jeremaiah 17:1, where "The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond," but the rock imagery suggests Job is the source here.

Blake's Homeric Cosmos

It seems no accident, then, that the Muses of Blake's two finished epics are figures of unity-in-division. Jesus, in orthodox formulation, is the unity of human and divine, fully God and fully human. The Daughters of Beulah, a multiplicity acting as one, derive their name from the Hebrew word for "married." But these are not his only Muses; Blake's Muse is highly variable, at times a vague abstraction like "Truth," at times a collection of figures, the Daughters of Beulah, or simply "the Eternals," and at times a single figure, like Jesus. In keeping with his vision of the unity of religion and art, these Muses do not simply sit above the action and narrate. They typically function in three roles. First, they serve as the speakers of divine oratory from the spiritual world Blake believed was accessible to the eye and ear unrefracted by materialist philosophy. Second, they serve as "narrative voices" in a literary sense, providing a sense of context and point of view through which the action of the poems is presented. Thirdly, they serve as representatives of particular primitivist traditions with particular meanings in the context of each poem.

The first of these functions has already been treated to some degree, but further examination of the dictation model will help clarify one of the most perplexing issues in the study of Blake: the nature of the spiritual world from which Blake's dictation comes. Did Blake see his spirits and angels as real, or merely literary, imaginary? The dictation model presents them as *both*: the Daughters of Beulah are part of the fantastic myth of *Milton*, but they are also the Muses who inspire the living, breathing Blake at his writing table in Felpham. Jesus appears as a character alongside the giant Albion in Chapter Four of *Jerusalem*, but he also hovers over Blake's bed each morning, calling him to write. Blake would have us believe that these literary characters dictated the very poems in which they appear. From a materialist perspective, this can only appear as insanity (Blake really believes his imaginary people are real) or allegory (He doesn't believe they're *real*, but rather that they represent real material phenomena). The former position is unsatisfactory (and almost universally rejected) because it reduces our interest in Blake to clinical curiosity. The latter, and much more common, position is unsatisfactory because Blake repudiated it himself. In fact, we can only understand the dictation model if we see it as an extension of a philosophy that considers the border between "real" and "imaginary" to be an illusion of the false doctrine of philosophical materialism. That is to say, for Blake, imagination *is* reality. "I know that This World Is a World of Imagination & Vision," he writes in the August 23, 1799 letter to Trusler (E 702). "You certainly Mistake when you say that the Visions of Fancy are not to be found in This World. To Me This World is all One continued Vision of Fancy or Imagination" (E 702). Blake considers ideas of materiality to be just such a "Vision of Fancy," and he was hardly unique in this. He would have encountered similar ideas in Berkeley, who believed materialism to be a refutable error, and in Hume, who saw it as an unprovable hypothesis. Blake's ultimate statement on materialism might be taken from *A Vision of the Last Judgment*: "Mental Things are alone Real what is Calld Corporeal Nobody Knows of its Dwelling Place it is in Fallacy & its Existence an Imposture Where is the Existence Out of Mind or Thought Where is it but in the Mind of a Fool" (E 565).

For Blake, the great theorists of materialism are Epicurus, Democritus, Newton and Locke. The world as experienced by their followers is Ulro, a world of darkness and war, of dead machinery churning silently in the void between the stars. The Blakean visionary, however, sees things differently. This alternate mode of perception is Eternity, and Blake's plates and poems amply demonstrate it to be profoundly organic and profoundly anthropomorphized, a living world defined above all by the universality of human form. This is perhaps most easily seen in *Thel*, where even the Worm and the supposedly inanimate Cloud and Clod of Clay have human form. The Worm is "like an infant wrapped in the Lillys leaf" (and drawn as such on plates 5 and 6), while the Clod "heard the Worms voice, & raisd her pitying head . . . then on Thel she fix'd her humble eyes" (E 5). Like the Fairy of *Europe*, Blake's poems show "all alive / The world, when every particle of dust breathes forth its joy" (E 60). The human psyche too, its drives, passions, faculties, and potentials, become in Blake a constellation of human figures ranging from ghastly Spectres (the "Reasoning Power in every Man" [E 202]) to beautiful youths and maidens.

In this visionary universe, the loss of human form is synonymous with error. Jerusalem, cast off by the fallen Albion in Chapter One of *Jerusalem*, strives to put off the human form, but fortunately, in vain (E 165). Satan, on the other hand, refuses form in *Milton* (E 97), and is the "Spectrous Chaos" who tells Albion that "the Human Form / You call Divine, is but a Worm seventy inches long" (E 175). Satan has also "witherd up the Human Form / By laws of sacrifice for sin" (E 173). The non-anthropomorphized vision of Satan is the "Web of Death" spun by Cathedrons Looms (E 120), and if not for the Furnaces of Los, the creative forge of the visionary imagination,

> No Human Form but only a Fibrous Vegetation
> A Polypus of soft affections without Thought or Vision
> Must tremble in the Heavens & Earths thro all the Ulro space (E 120)

This blind, fibrous, formless polypus is the human body conceived in materialistic terms, a mass of muscle and nerve fibres, trembling with instinctive emotions of the kind postulated by empiricist psychology. In the triumphant apocalypse of *Jerusalem* we see the complete reversal of this disturbing image. Here, the material universe is completely humanized, the "Four Faces of Humanity" (the Zoas) converse together in visionary forms, and "every Word & Every Character Was Human," and "All Human Forms [are] identified even Tree Metal Earth & Stone" (E 257-8). This, too, is the "Vision of Light" Blake describes in the letter to Butts dated October 2, 1800, in which each Newtonian particle of morning light is revealed to be "a Man Human formd" (E 712). The light-figures tell Blake that all natural objects,

> Each herb & each tree
> Mountain hill Earth & Sea
> Cloud Meteor and Star
> Are Men seen Afar (E 712).

This universe of Human Forms is filled with potential speakers. Indeed, it might not be too much to say that Blake's universe is comprised of nothing *but* speakers. Everything that exists, within or without the psyche, is endowed with the power of speech, and the poet's "vegetated body" (E 555) may function as a conduit for any of these speakers. Consideration of this profoundly *oral* universe leads us once again to the theoretical context of the dictation model for elucidation of Blake's methods and meanings. In our own time, Walter J. Ong has observed that an agonistic, personalized cosmology and psychology is typical of preliterate cultures (Ong, *Orality* 43-44), and the classicist E.R. Dodds has noted that (much like Blake), "Homeric man has no unified concept of what we call 'soul' or 'personality'" (Dodds 15). Both of these circumstances were known in the eighteenth century, and most major theorists of the time tried to account for them. For Blair, it is simply an expression of "a wonderful proneness in human nature to animate all objects" (Blair, *Lectures* 409). Among "men of lively imagination, in the early ages of the world," this led to the "multiplication of divinities" (409). Blair notes the persistence of this habit in the rhetorical device of *prosopoeia*, or personification, but remarks that this device, while "the boldest of all rhetorical Figures," is not to be attempted except "when the mind is considerably heated and agitated . . . in a state of violent emotion" (409). Personification is a natural expression only of very strong passions, argues Blair, and appears as affectation when these passions are not evident. The relation of personification to passion may explain its ubiquity in primeval cultures, for "[i]n the infancy of all societies, men are much under the dominion of imagination and passion" (141). Lowth credits the habit of personification more directly to the extreme passion of the ancient oral poets, "for, to those, who are violently agitated themselves, the universal nature of things seems under a necessity of being affected with similar emotions" (Lowth 79). The personalized cosmos is here attributed directly to the heightened emotional state associated with the oral composition of poetry. Blackwell shares Lowth's belief that "the Torrent of the Poetic Passion" is a factor, but sees the personification of things and ideas as partly a matter of audience management (Blackwell 157). "The Man who can give his Ideas Life and Colouring . . . who can bestow upon them a human Appearance, and then weave them into a strange and passionate Story; to him we listen with Wonder, and greedily learn his soothing Tale," he observes (155). Blackwell imagines an ancient bard trying to teach his audience the philosophical principle that "that Time and Space were the ancientest of things," but finding that "Such Doctrine as this had found no admission into the Minds, nor Welcome from the Fancy of the Uncultivated Crowd" (155, 156). "But when, after striking his Lyre . . . he took up another Strain, and began to unfold the ancient Reign of hoary Saturn," the bard finds that "It was then that the stubborn Multitude opened their Hearts to the wondrous Tale; and with a pleasing Amazement received his sayings" (156). Blackwell even recommends that modern poets adopt these techniques. Citing Davenant's *Gondibert* (1651) as an example, Blackwell states that writing an epic poem without mythological allegory is like "lopping off a Man's Limb, and then putting him upon running Races" (153). One notable dissenter from the mainstream of theory on this subject is William Warburton, author of *The Divine Legation of Moses* (1738-41). Although Warburton agrees that in oral cultures, "[a]ll the Qualities of the Mind, all the Affections of the Body, all the Properties of Countries, Cities, Rivers, Mountains, became the Seeds of living things," he insists that this is not due to "the Warmth of a Poetic Fancy, as is commonly supposed" (Warburton 146). Personification is instead the result of the limited vocabulary and unsophisticated ideas of primitive cultures, their "Want of Words" and "Rusticity of Conception" (146). Warburton is characteristically less sentimental than most eighteenth-century theorists of the primeval past, but he concurs with the majority opinion in attributing this cosmology to the conditions of preliteracy.

In its historical context, then, the cosmology implied by Blake's dictation model is a recreation of what eighteenth-century theorists considered the preliterate world-view.

Blake's anthropomorphized cosmos of "Giant Forms" (E 145) has an aesthetic logic that goes beyond mere imitativeness or an unsophisticated desire to achieve a superficial epic quality. There existed a theory (sufficiently well-known, in its most popular version, that Warburton considered it "commonly supposed") linking these Forms to the cultural conditions of oral bardism. Anthropomorphized legends, communicated in poetic form, were believed to grow naturally out of the passion of oral composition, and were considered capable of communicating abstract philosophy in an appealing manner. In a remark reminiscent of Sheridan's wish that the English clergy would master the art of elocution, Blackwell even asserts that the bard's mythologizing of moral and philosophical truths causes the populace to "conceiv[e] a high Reverence for their Teacher, and [be] struck with an Awe and Dread of the Deities which he sung" (Blackwell 157). The aesthetics of mythologization include a model of audience-poet interaction in which the poet and his creations borrow a kind of spiritual legitimacy from the awe inspired by the supernaturally powerful figures of poetry.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing, however, about Blake's cosmology, apart from its internal complexity, is that Blake seems to have made a conscious decision to *believe* it. His recreation of a primitivist cosmology was not simply an artistic exercise, but a dramatic demonstration of the power of an artist's creative imagination to reshape his own experience. This extraordinary exercise in imaginative autonomy has both a philosophical and an aesthetic basis. The philosophical basis can be found in Blake's rejection of Newton and Locke and what Blake considered their Deistic universe of dead matter animated by a puppet-master God. The Newton-Locke model is, for Blake, merely another of the "sects of Philosophy . . . from the Poetic Genius adapted to the weaknesses of every individual" (E 1), and its most devastating weakness is that it denies the role of the Poetic Genius in its own construction. As Colin Turbayne has pointed out, the Newtonian world, structured by "the myth of bodies attracting and repelling each other," is an elaborate metaphor whose metaphoric nature was forgotten within a generation (Turbayne 60). From the Newtonian perspective, human creativity is simply another material phenomenon, the activity of a physical brain, or of a soul made of some refined meta-matter. Blake's anthropomorphized cosmos, on the other hand, places "the human form divine" (E 13, 32, 522, etc.) in the foreground of its conception of experience. The human form, as essence of the Blakean cosmos, is not a *material* form, in the Newtonian sense, but rather a *symbol* of human creativity (the "Poetic Genius"), which Blake considered the source of all experience, and a *symbol* of human expressivity and receptivity, which he considered our model for the interactions of all things.[1] The ubiquity of the human body in Blake is a metaphor for the omnipresence of human Imagination, the *primum mobile*, "the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus blessed for ever," the creator of all world-views, definitions, and experiences (E 229). To say that everything has Human Form is to say that everything is Imagination, that everything speaks to us in our Imaginations, that the trees on the mountainside are the sons of Los, "[u]ttering prophecies and speaking instructive words to the sons / Of men" (E 123). Like every philosopher and prophet, Blake was creating a world from the inspiration of Poetic Genius, but he felt that the anthropomorphic universe was more *true*, in an important way, than its mechanistic counterpart.

---

[1] Turbayne notes that a key factor aiding the survival of Newton's metaphors of bodies attracting and repelling each other was that "they shared with the most enduring myths of antiquity the metaphor of personification" (Turbayne 60).

Blake viewed the anthropomorphic legends of the ancient poets who "animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses" (E 38) as evidence that they shared his philosophy. The Greek legends he considered inferior and derivative, following most theorists of the time in thinking them copies of Semitic originals (Blackwell, for instance, argues at some length that Homer's mythos was essentially Egyptian [Blackwell 168]). The Greek myths are thus the reconstructed relics of earlier Vision, and the Greek Muses the daughters of Memory, and not of inspiration, as Blake never tires of repeating (e.g. E 95, 531, etc.). He argues, in the *Song of Los*, that the original vision of the inspired poets of the Hebrew-Egyptian world became corrupted by the materializing and abstract tendencies of the Greek philosophers: "Palamabron gave an abstract Law: To Pythagoras Socrates & Plato" (E 67). The "Philosophy of Five Senses" built by these philosophers is the ancestor of the materialism of Blake's own age, for "Urizen wept & gave it into the hands of Newton & Locke" (E 68). Greek philosophy changed the original Semitic vision into "Fable or Allegory" (E 554), a mode of art in which anthropomorphic legends become a mask for materialism. "Fable or Allegory is Seldom without some Vision," Blake concedes, "Pilgrims Progress is full of it the Greek Poets the same but Allegory & Visions of Imagination ought to be known as Two Distinct Things & so calld for the Sake of Eternal Life" (E 554). Greek rational philosophy and physical science are the "nets & gins & traps to catch the joys of Eternity" (E 67) and represent the principle opposed to the humanized cosmos of Homer, the Bible, and Blake himself. So it is that "No man can believe that either Homer's Mythology, or Ovid's, were the production of Greece, or of Latium" (E 531).

Because Blake reads his own rejection of materialist philosophy into primitivist theory, his understanding of oral myth is much more complex than those of his contemporaries who did not question the "Newtonian Phantasm" (E 141). Blackwell, in fact, contends that one of the chief pleasures experienced by both the bard and his audience is the deciphering of the allegory, and "comparing it with the Truth which it covers" (Blackwell 155). Blake would have considered this a misunderstanding of the nature of myth. Myth is not an anthropomorphic code for a more fundamental materialist philosophy, it *is* the truest philosophy, the only one that foregrounds the "human form divine." Blake's own myths should therefore not be understood allegorically, as they commonly are, but rather completely literally in the context of an anthropomorphic cosmology. As strange as it may seem, the poems are, as Blake said, "Vision," the literal recounting of what he *saw*, not with "the Vegetated Mortal Eye's perverted & single vision" but with the "visionary eye" (E 202). This may be why Blake frequently speaks mythologically even in his letters and everyday conversation. Since "[t]he tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way," the inhabitant of a primitivistic living cosmos has experiences and emotions impossible to translate into a Newtonian context (E 702). In particular, the anthropomorphist is able to *love* the world, as a whole and in its parts. Blackwell makes this point in his theory that stories about human-like beings have an aesthetic and emotional power abstractions can never match, and Blake felt very much the same. "Think of a white cloud. as being holy you cannot love it" says Blake in his annotations to Swedenborg's *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, "but think of a holy man within the cloud love springs up in your thoughts" (E 603). The experience of loving a cloud, however, appears irrational to those who imagine a cloud to be a collection of inanimate particles. The experiences that arise out of the adoption of Blake's philosophy must therefore remain in the terms of that philosophy. We cannot translate these experiences into materialist philosophy without making them seem ridiculous, but we *can* understand them if we first understand and then "Enter into" Blake's anthropomorphic philosophy "on the Firey Chariot of . . . Contemplative Thought" as he expected his contemporaries to do (560). Blake believed, and expected his readers to believe, that the world-view implied by the dictation model had the oldest and best of pedigrees, that it was the Original Philosophy, metaphysical foundation of the world's greatest poetry, that he was reviving the oral culture of the ancients in his own art and life, and that they could do the same.

Blake's Muses: Thematic Concerns

Blake's Muses indicate the cosmological context in which the poems are to be understood and the historical theories that define this context, but their meanings are also interwoven with the particular tales they tell. The Eternals who dictate *The Book of Urizen* are themselves characters in the poem, spectators of Urizen's self-contemplations who angrily intervene when they feel matters have gone too far (E 70-71). The *Book of Urizen* is thus narrated by Urizen's spiritual opponents, and that Blake "gladly" receives their dictation reveals his own anti-Urizenic loyalties (E 70). The Eternals are a curious mixture of pagan and Christian tradition, clearly polytheistic in their vague multiplicity, but residing in Eden, the garden of Hebrew-Christian myth. This strange fusion of primitivist traditions reflects Blake's conviction that "All Religions are One" in their origin as primal inspiration from the Poetic Genius. The eclectic nature of his poetic *enthusiasmos* should therefore, he believed, be seen as a mark of its authenticity. The Daughters of Beulah, the muses of *Milton* and *The Four Zoas* (the aged mother, Eno, is a Daughter), reflect a similar fusion, deriving their name from the Bible (Isaiah 62:4), but inhabiting a realm of "soft sexual delusions / Of varied beauty" (E 96), and clearly modelled on the Greek daughters of Mnemosyne. The Daughters recur as characters throughout Blake's epics, always as figures of goodness. Mild and faithful worshippers of Jesus (E 337), they are capable of expressing the Divine Voice in their songs (E 132), including, perhaps, those they dictate to Blake. The story of their name suggests they are trustworthy Muses; the name Beulah ("married") is given to the Holy Land by God to signify the indissoluble union between the land and people of Israel. For Blake, "Israel" (God's chosen people) is the human race as a whole (E 174), which suggests that the Daughters are the offspring of a "marriage" between humanity and its divine birthright. This birthright, to a Christian, is the redemption offered by Jesus. The Daughters, then, are the organic offspring (that is, children) of redeemed humanity, and as such, well-suited to be the "Daughters of Inspiration" (E 95), replacements for the war-loving Greek muses. Usually portrayed singing (their lament for Ololon in *Milton* is one of Blake's most vivid celebrations of the beauty of song [E 130-131]), the Daughters represent the same careful integration of Blakean philosophy and primitivist meaning that characterizes the dictation model as a whole.

Another kind of fusion is found in *Europe*. Here, a captured Fairy offers to "write a book on leaves of flowers" for the Blake-narrator, a promise fulfilled in the final lines when the narrator says, "I came / Into my parlour and sat down, and took my pen to write:/ My Fairy sat upon the table, and dictated EUROPE" (E 60). Blake here draws on a native primitivist tradition, that of English folklore. John Adlard suggests that despite the early date of the frontispiece, the prefatory poem may be influenced by a prominent series of articles on fairies in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1795, but he also offers evidence that Blake's fairies derive from living oral tradition (Adlard 75). Adlard notes that the image of the narrator knocking the Fairy down "as boys knock down a butterfly" (E 60) and catching him in his hat "smacks strongly of West Country lore," in which butterflies figure as minor rural spirits (Adlard 76). This is part of "a conspicuous occurrence of what seems to be West Country lore" in Blake, Adlard observes, noting the biographical tradition that Blake's family sprang from the Somerset Blakes (126). His fairies also show signs of Irish influence, according to Adlard, who argues that this must have come from oral sources, since written accounts of popular Irish folklore were unknown in England until after Blake's death (37).The Fairy of *Europe* is himself a rural bard; the Blake-narrator first encounters him singing the poem's opening lines ("Five windows light the cavern'd man" [E 60]) as he sits on a flower in the forest.

This doubly oral figure sings *Europe* in response to Blake's question, "[W]hat is the material world, and is it dead?" (E 60). The Fairy promises to "shew . . . all alive the world," and, in fact, fulfills this promise by narrating the history of Europe in anthropomorphized terms, as the story of "the night of Enitharmon's joy" (E 62). The "material world" is revealed to be a figment of Enitharmon's dream, "when the five senses whelm'd / In deluge o'er the earth-born man" and the universe is transformed into "earths rolling in circles of space" (E 63). The philosophy of materialism reaches its zenith of power with the coming of Newton, who blows the Last Trumpet to defray the rising power of Orc. This wakes Enitharmon, ending the "female dream" of orthodox Christian morality (always associated with materialism in Blake) and triggering the French Revolution (E 63). The Fairy is thus intimately connected to his story, a representative of nature as seen with the visionary (that is, anthropomorphizing, primitivist) eye, dictating the story of this very perspective's destruction and rebirth in visionary terms.[1] As we would expect, the Fairy's visionary perspective is associated with orality, with energy, spontaneity and music, while inside Enitharmon's dream, Albion's Angel stalks the land silently, and human ears, "the ever-varying spiral ascents to the heavens of heavens/ Were bended downward . . . barr'd and petrify'd against the infinite" (E 63). The Fairy's song, sung "to this soft lute" stands in contrast to the "harps unstrung" of "the night of Nature" (E 60, 63). Blake's now triply oral Fairy embodies the Original Philosophy of primeval humanity even as he practices it by singing anthropomorphized history and defends it by singing of its fall and imminent rise.

The dictating figures of Blake's other poems are less easily identified. The *Song of Los* is narrated by a speaker who has apparently heard Los sing the song "to four harps at the tables of Eternity," but whether this speaker is Blake himself or another Eternal is unclear (E 67). The names "Ahania" and "Los" at the heads of the first text pages of *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los* are reminiscent of playscript, and perhaps indicate that these figures, like the Eternals in *Urizen*, are telling their own story. The *Songs of Innocence* are narrated by the Piper, but while the Cloud-Child clearly directs the Piper to

---

[1] Adlard notes that the *Gentleman's Magazine* attributes the decline of belief in fairies to the rise of "the real philosophy" of "experiments" (qtd. in Adlard 76).

record his songs, there is no hint that he dictates these songs to the Piper. The Bard of *Experience* has "heard / The Holy Word / That walk'd among the ancient trees," but again, dictation is not directly implied (E 18). Blake offers no hints at all as to the origin of *The French Revolution* and *America*, unless we speculate that his description of the Daughters of Beulah as the "Muses who inspire the Poets Song" extends beyond *Milton* (E 96). Perhaps, in these cases, Blake felt that the names of the Muses were not essential to the poems' meanings, it being enough to recognize (self-evidently, if one had absorbed primitivist theory as Blake felt his readers should have) that they are manifestations of the primeval, anti-Newtonian philosophy, or to know that the poet who wrote them said

> tho I call them mine I know that they are not Mine being of the same opinion with Milton when he says That the Muse visits his Slumbers & awakes & governs his Song when Morn purples The East. & being also in the predicament of that prophet who says I cannot go beyond the command of the Lord to speak good or bad. (E 701)

Problems of the Dictation Model: Revisable Inspiration

One would not expect to find signs of revision and correction in the records of the spontaneous outpourings of spirits and angels, but Blake's surviving works present us with this paradox. Blake claimed that *Milton*, for example, was "producd from immediate Dictation . . . without Labour or Study" (E 729), yet the poem shows evidence of extensive revision, including a dramatic reduction in size from twelve to two books

(Erdman, *Prophet* 423-4). Blake's manuscript and notebook pages are filled with scratch-outs and rewrites, often to the point of illegibility. Even the text of the finished illuminated books is at times incomplete: a quick glance at the missing and deleted passages in the first plates of *Jerusalem* demonstrates that the "final" version is not quite final. Such concrete evidence of authorial indecision seems to indicate that the legitimizing claims Blake makes for his poetry on the basis of their mode of composition are, at best, wishful thinking. This evaluation, however, is founded on an idea of textuality that twentieth-century research suggests is unknown in oral cultures. Walter Ong has argued that the notion of a text as a fixed sequence of words and letters is a peculiarity of literate societies accustomed to conceptualizing language in terms of sets of visual symbols. The advent of print dramatically reinforces this habit by making it possible to create thousands of identical copies of the same sequence of symbols. The sequence itself becomes perceived as an abstract entity, a Platonic Form called "the text" of which individual copies are incarnations. To change this sequence of symbols in any copy is to revise (or corrupt) "the text." Ong notes that literates interested in oral culture typically bring this idea of textuality to their study of orality, and are amazed at the spectacle of oral bards reciting complete epic poems from memory. Even considering the mnemonic nature of oral poetry, it seems an incredible feat to remember such a long sequence of symbols. Albert Lord's investigations into the practices of Serbian *guslars* have revealed the situation to be more complicated, however. Although these bards insist that every recitation of the same poem is "word for word and line for line," as Lord interprets, the actuality is much different (Ong, *Orality* 61). "[W]hen their purported verbatim renditions are recorded and compared," Ong observes, "they turn out to be never the same, though the songs are recognizable versions of the same story" (61). Ong concludes that "word for word and line for line" is "simply an emphatic way of saying 'like'" (61), but Jack Goody has pointed out that without a written text, it is difficult for anyone to tell whether two versions of a long poem are the same or not (quoted in Edwards and Sienkiwicz 37). In oral cultures, says Goody, "the concept of 'sameness' may be much looser; it may refer not to verbal identity but to some kind of unspecified structural similarity" (37). Ong agrees that oral poets do not work with "texts" as literates understand the term, but that "[t]he fixed materials in the bard's memory are a float of themes and formulas out of which all stories are variously built" (Ong, *Orality* 60). The evidence suggests that Lord's bards consider a particular "float of themes and formulas" to be the essence of a poem, rather than a particular sequence of words. Reciting the same story in different words does not compromise the repetition, as long as narrative and formulaic essentials are present. The distinction here is similar to that most literates would draw between a scholarly edition of *Hamlet* and "the story of Hamlet." To the literate mind, the formal text is substantial and real, while the mere "story of Hamlet" seems a somewhat formless collection of themes and plotlines. The "story of Hamlet," however, is infinitely flexible, able to be adapted to the stage (as Shakespeare himself did from earlier sources), modernized, even transformed into an electronic spectacle, all without losing its essential identity. As with a piece of oral literature, certain essentials (a general plotline, characters, and so on) must be preserved for the story to retain its integrity, but possibilities for adaptation and interpretation are unlimited. The belief that the essence of textuality is found in fluid configurations of themes and formulas rather than in sequences of symbols seems to be characteristic of the oral mind. Our modern inclination to call quite different written texts "editions" or "versions" (that is to say, *performances*) of the abstract essence *Hamlet*, seems an obvious example of what Ong calls "residual orality."

This oral model of textuality might not have appeared strange to Blake. Eighteenth-century primitivist theory typically imagines oral poetry emerging from the poet's mouth in a state of natural perfection, but Blake was capable of deviating from established theory. Perhaps because he was unusually committed to its practice, Blake frequently probed more deeply into the significance of orality than his contemporaries. He would have known from the editorial notes in Percy's *Reliques*, if not from personal experience of the sort described in *An Island in the Moon*, that ancient songs and ballads existed in differing versions, and he might well have considered the possibility that an oral "text" can take a variety of related forms. This flexible notion of textuality would allow a poem to be divine, dictated, and revisable all at once. Where the secretary's emendations do not represent difficulties in hearing the Muse's words (the "blotting and blurring demons" that "molested him continually" may play a role here [E 546]), they may simply represent variations in the dictating Muse's performance of the same oral "text."

The sense of repetition Blake's body of work inspires is further evidence of this conception of textuality. One often encounters in Blake the same story in different versions. The fall and enslavement of humanity, for instance, is effected in *The Song of Los* by the children of Los, who give abstract religion and philosophy directly to Socrates, Plato, Jesus, Mohammed and Brama (E 67). The same historical process is described in quite different terms in *The Book of Urizen*. Here, Urizen's shadow coalesces into the "Net of Religion" which spreads over the cities of the world as Urizen walks above them, lost in pity (E 82), and the children of Los are not mentioned at all. In *Jerusalem*, we find England (and the world, by extension) falling under the dominion of "Laws of Moral Virtue . . . war & princedom & victory" as Albion rejects Jesus's love (E 146). But even where characters and actions remain the same, Blake may use different words, styles, and levels of detail. Urizen's measuring of the Abyss (depicted in the famous frontispiece to *Europe*) is described very briefly in *The Book of Urizen* (E 80-81), but at great length and in a completely different prosodic style in *The Four Zoas* (E 319-20). One might even argue that Blake relates only one story in all his works, that of humanity's fall and potential redemption. His poetry, however, demonstrates that this story can be told in a large number of ways, each drawing on the same "float of themes and formulas," the same Blakean mythology and stylistic dialects.

The many variations in Blake's illuminated books and in the organization of collections of smaller poems (for example, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*) reflect the same loose notion of textuality. In an oral context, two different sequences of words can be the same song, and for Blake, it seems that two different sequences of symbols and paintings can both be *Songs of Experience*. This approach to textuality gives Blake's work an unusual vitality and flexibility. It is difficult to think of Blake's texts as static entities. Strictly speaking, there is no single textual entity we can point to and call *Jerusalem*. Five complete copies printed by Blake exist, three with one arrangement of plates, two with another. "Evidently he found both sequences attractive but considered neither definitive," observes Erdman (Erdman, "Textual Notes" 809). No two of the twenty-one extant copies of *Songs of Innocence* are arranged in the same order, and after trying out nineteen arrangements of the combined *Songs*, and settling on a definitive order for seven of the last eight copies, Blake altered the arrangement once again in the final extant copy (791). Each extant version of the *Songs*, each variation of the story of humanity's fall, is in fact a singular performance of Blake's composite art, with the uniqueness and particularity of a concert or a recital. Considered in the terms of literate textuality, Blake's body of work is formless, unfinished, repetitive and chaotic. In the terms of oral textuality, Blake sings the same mythic songs over and over again, varying them with each performance, but always remaining true to their thematic essence.

Problems of the Dictation Model: Conception and Execution

Another potential problem with the dictation model concerns its compatibility with another of the key principles of Blake's theory of art, his belief in the unity of conception and execution. The division of the compositional process into phases of conception and execution was a basic principle of the progressive model of art propagated by those eighteenth-century theorists who sought to foster a native school of English painting and engraving. The most prominent of these theorists was the great portraitist Sir Joshua Reynolds, who defended the theory in his influential *Discourses on Art* (1769-91), to Blake's immense annoyance. The division of conception and execution was useful to artistic reformers because it allowed art to be analyzed on the level of imagination as well as that of technique. What can be analyzed can be imitated and improved upon, the argument goes, and English artists could hope to acquire skill in both conception and execution by rational study and practice. They could then raise English art to greatness (or at least, respectability) in the eyes of Europe by diligently building on the greatness of the past. Art was to partake of the general historical improvement in knowledge, and become a field where, as Reynolds says, "reason ought to preside from first to last" (qtd. in E 660).

Blake detested this view of art partly because it "Endeavours to prove That there is No such thing as Inspiration & that any Man of a plain Understanding may by Thieving from Others become a Mich Angelo," (E 646) and partly because it formed the theoretical foundation for a commercial aesthetic that restricted the range of publicly acceptable styles and subjects to those most suited to mass production. As Blake explains the matter in *Public Address* and the annotations to Reynolds' *Discourses*, an artistic process dividing conception from execution is able to make use of the principle of division of labour for evil purposes. Teams of journeymen working from their masters' conceptions can produce paintings much more quickly than individual artists working alone. But since true artists work by immediate inspiration, not by delegation, such mass-produced paintings are "wretched Bungles" (E 655), or as Blake said of Rubens' work, the "Lifes Labour of Ignorant journeymen Suited for the Purposes of Commerce" (E 573). Nevertheless, these factory-made artworks dominate the market by dint of sheer volume. The public becomes accustomed to the standardized styles and subjects favoured by these art factories, and learns to react with distaste to anything else. "Commerce Cannot endure Individual Merit its insatiable Maw must be fed by What all can do Equally well at least it is so in England as I have found to my Cost these Forty Years," writes Blake (E 573). Reynolds' theory of art, he believed, existed merely to give this kind of raw commercialism a veneer of respectability.

The *unity* of conception and execution, on the other hand, is "the guiding theoretical ideal of the *Public Address*" (Eaves, *Conspiracy* 177). Robert Essick calls it "Blake's central aesthetic and epistemological doctrine" (Essick, *Language* 161). In short, the doctrine states that nothing has definite existence until it has definite form, and nothing is fully conceived until it is fully executed. At first glance, the dictation model appears a clear violation of this principle, identifying conception and execution as the tasks of two separate persons, a speaker and a writer. Addressing this question in *William Blake and the Language of Adam*, Robert Essick argues that "any shadow of an inconsistency" between the dictation theory and Blake's insistence on the spontaneity and unity of art is removed if we accept his hypothesis that Blake saw language itself as his Muse (161-162). "Language is the poetic genius within and without the individual," says Essick, "for it is simultaneously an extra-personal system by which he must allow himself to be guided, and an intensely personal medium" (161-162). Language spontaneously suggests meaning even as it provides the medium for meaning's expression, and "Blake's imagining of 'the Saviour' as the muse of *Jerusalem* hints at this unity of origins and means: the Word dictates the words" (161). This is a variation of Essick's broader thesis that Romantic models of inspiration are most usefully interpreted as pre-scientific (or less charitably, nostalgic) myths describing the subjective experience of working with artistic media. Essick argues that any medium simultaneously enables, limits and stimulates the artist's creativity, blocking its development in certain directions while encouraging it in others. In the case of Blake, quill, copperplate, and the English language emerge as the realities hidden behind the mask of the Muse. While this view of Blakean inspiration is richly suggestive and consistent with Blake's theory of the unity of conception and execution, it is not completely satisfying. Morris Eaves points out that Essick's reading "tends to sentimentalize 'the medium,' thus confusing Blake's Platonistic if not Platonic theorizing with the kind of Wordsworthian naturalism that promotes the deep engagement of human subjects with natural objects" (Eaves, *Conspiracy* 184). Essick's hypothesis contextualizes language as a physical medium, a set of material (visual-oral-aural) objects that stimulate and limit the natural imagination, and is therefore "insufficiently answerable to the severe oppositions that structure Blake's theorizing" (184). Blake's own statements seem to confirm Eaves' critique. Far from consciously finding inspiration in material media, Blake states that "Natural Objects always did & now do Weaken deaden & obliterate Imagination in Me" (E 665). The underlying materialism of Essick's hypothesis is revealed in his analysis of the all-humanizing conclusion of *Jerusalem*. "Through the trope of personification," he states, "language can . . . be used to grant human qualities to the non-human or to the abstractions language itself produces" (Essick, *Language* 235). Blake's humanized cosmos thus becomes, in effect, an allegory for "linguistic consciousness," since "the human forms of these things in our world are the names we give them, the words by which they can be identified and made part of human subjectivity" (235). Read in this way, the conclusion of *Jerusalem* becomes a poeticized description of the Newton-Locke theory of language in which a detached subjectivity arbitrarily assigns signs to simple ideas (impressed on the mind by a dead material world) and then to the complex ideas constructed from these simple ideas. *Jerusalem* itself is the "projection of phenomenological linguistics into an ontology" (235). But an ontology whose entire meaning is the figural representation of another ontology is, in fact, an allegory, and in this case, an allegory for an ontology

Blake considered false and pernicious. For Blake, the "ground of being" (235) is not language, but the "human form divine," outward manifestation of the Divine Body, Imagination, of which language is only one expression.[1]

The hypothesis that Blake conceived of the dictation model primarily in terms of primitivist theory resolves the apparent conception-execution separation in another way. If the dictation model is understood as consciously set within a primitivist cosmology and its related theory of orality, and Blake is viewed as the amanuensis to a non-material universe comprised of Human Forms, we must recognize that conception and execution *both* occur in Eternity, during the oral phase of the dictation process. "To the Public" describes the prosody, tone, and style of *Jerusalem* as growing out of an oratorical performance combining conception and execution in a single performative act. Blake-the-amanuensis merely copies what he hears and feels. As he states in *Public Address,* his role as an artist is to "copy Imagination" (E 574), and "[h]e who copies does not Execute he only Imitates what is already Executed" (E 576). Copying is "Manual Labour" and "a work of no Mind" (578), but has many useful purposes and is not to be neglected. The printing press copies, the student artist copies ("To learn the Language of Art Copy for Ever. is My Rule" [E 636]), and so too does the guided hand of Eternity's amanuensis. Every book, every engraving, is a copy; Blake the printmaker could hardly have hated copying as such. For Blake, indeed, every artist is a copyist, either of Imagination or of Nature. The copying of Nature as it appears to the Newtonian mind, however, leads away from the truth that "This World is all One continued Vision of Fancy or Imagination," and the result is formless art, "Blots and Blurs" (E 575). Because copying is such a powerful process, multiplying its object for good or ill (a phenomenon amply demonstrated in the printing press), the dictation model subordinates it to an oral inspiration that bears within itself both conception *and* execution.

---

[1] Other expressions of Imagination equally important to Blake are visual representations (paintings, visions), non-linguistic sound (music, emotive outbursts), and form (as a general principle). Far from being primary, language in Blake's mythos is generated by pre-existing Human Forms, and English in particular is the "rough basement" constructed by Los to bring joy to Albion, "who else must have been a Dumb despair" (E 183).

It is worth noting here that Blake, for three years secretary to Hayley, is very aware of the hierarchical relationship inherent in the idea of dictation. The word "dictate" appears in a number of places in his poetry in the sense of oral command or law. Luvah, in *The Four Zoas*, rejects Urizen's authority with a curt "Dictate to thy equals" (E 311), but the term is most prominent in *Milton,* written during the Felpham years. In *Milton*, the authoritarian meaning of "dictation" structures some of the poem's most important dramatic and thematic moments. During their final confrontation, Satan commands Milton, "[S]ubmit thy supreme / Dictate, to my eternal Will and to my dictate bow" (E 139). If we consider that Hayley is usually believed to be the model for *Milton*'s Satan, this image of Satan demanding submission from a fallen poet is suggestive. To receive "dictation" from Satan / Hayley is to participate in the world of "Counter Arts" Hayley so skillfully manipulated to his own financial and social advantage. Blake's work for Hayley in these years was generally commercial and often banal: pictures of animals for Hayley's *Ballads*, portrait miniatures, even engravings of amateur illustrations by Maria Flaxman. Satan / Hayley's dictate is clear: succeed in commercial and social terms. To follow this as a poet would mean writing conventionally moral and sentimental poems like Hayley's own, celebrating "the Idol Virtues of the Natural Heart" (E 139), and denying the "supreme dictate" or "Universal Dictate" given to Ololon by the Divine

Family, "Watch over this World, and with your brooding wings, / Renew it to Eternal Life" (E 116). To reject Satan's dictate, on the other hand, is to try to "renew the world to Eternal Life" by means of true art and poetry. This Blake did, at first in his free time at Felpham, and later in his efforts to promote his own profoundly unfashionable prophetic art. However, to reach the World with his divine message, Blake had to make use of the instruments of Commerce, the technological mechanisms of copying. The dictation model of art (the "commanding" model of art, one might say) subordinates these mechanisms to the Universal Dictate, to "the dictates of our Angels," in a firmly hierarchical way (E 724). Like the Spectre of Los, they must be "compell[ed] to labours Mighty"; like the Eternal Prophet, the poet must command them, "Obey my voice, and never deviate from my will" (E 153).

The dictation model's paradoxical idea of oral textuality is more difficult to account for in terms of the unity of conception and execution than the divided, hierarchical structure of the model itself. The idea that a series of expressions of a single "float of themes and formulas" might comprise a single work of art seems problematic in this context, in that it suggests the possibility that every work of art exists first in the imagination as an abstract conception, and later in a variety of executions tailored to the requirements of particular performances. This is precisely the generalizing theory of art Blake despised, and on the basis of which he was criticized as a painter and engraver. "[T]he Lavish praise I have recieved from all Quarters for Invention & Drawing has Generally been accompanied by this he can conceive but he cannot Execute," he complains in *Public Address* (E 582). However, if we consider the nature of the "float of themes and formulas" that comprise the essence of an oral "text," we find it to be a rather amorphous entity, a set of raw materials rather than a clearly defined conception. The anthropologists Edwards and Sienkiwicz observe, "Although there are certain fixed elements which guide the [oral] artist and provide a framework for composition, the way in which these elements are realized and combined is very much an individual matter" (Edwards and Sienkiwicz 61). Oral poets rhapsodizing ("stitching together") their songs work more like artists than architects. They have no blueprint, no clearly defined conception of what a song will have been like after they have finished it. Rather, they rummage through their mental stock of formulas and phrases, looking for likely looking bits of verse, useful fragments of plot and theme, constructing as they go along. The mental stock of a successful bard is huge, and the poet is adept at quickly finding what he needs, but one thing this stock does not contain is a firm conception of the finished product. Even if an oral bard were capable of forming such a conception, it would only hinder his ability to adapt his song to the changing needs of his audience. For the oral bard, execution is the process of giving form to vagueness, of turning the indefinite into the definite. The bard has not truly conceived until he has executed. As Blake might say, before the bard executes, he has only "unorganized Blots & Blurs" that "are not Art" (E 576). From the perspective of oral textuality, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and Urizen's measuring of the Abyss become new works of art, new conceptions, each time they are given new form. These "variations" in Blake's texts and stories may be thought of as a series of spontaneous (dictated) oral performances, each a new conception, a new "form-giving" or rhapsodizing of the same indefinite mass of materials. The oral conception of textuality is therefore consistent with the theory of unity of conception and execution, and with Blake's aggressive attitude towards static abstractions of all kinds.

Blake's vision of orality's potential for subverting the Urizenic aspects of the literate, "fixed text" model of textuality will be treated more thoroughly in the next chapter.

Chapter IV

From Urizen's Books to the Bible of Hell:

Primitive Orality and Illuminated Printing

This chapter considers the theoretical basis of the illuminated book, arguing that this unique medium must be understood in the context of Blake's primitivist ideas about history. Blake divides history into three phases, roughly corresponding to the three psychological-spiritual states of innocence, fall, and redemption. The earliest phase is that of primitive oral culture, the age of prophets and bards. By examining the place of literacy in Blake's mythologized history, this chapter demonstrates that Blake believes this phase ends when bardic culture is overthrown by a new, priestly culture armed with the technologies of literacy. This is primitivism refracted by the lens of Paineite political radicalism, and a comparison of Blake's historical model with that of Thomas Paine (as expounded in *The Age of Reason* [1795]) shows that Blake and Paine share similar concerns about the place of the literate text in oppressive systems of authority. For both Blake and Paine, the Bible is the primary document at issue, and this comparison will be structured by an analysis of Blake's relevant annotations to Watson's *Apology for the Bible* (1797). These annotations expose the source of Blake's ambivalence about the central document of English literate culture, and allow us to explore his oral theory of reading, counterpart of the dictation model of composition. These discussions will prepare the ground for an examination of Blake's proposal in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to give the world a new "Bible of Hell" (E 44). The creation of this new Bible marks the beginning of history's final phase, which occurs when priestly oppression sparks the revival of bardic culture and the technologies of literacy are redeemed as subordinate elements of a new, more expansive culture of orality. The illuminated book, a hierarchical synthesis of organic oral energy and mechanical literate efficiency, is the medium of this apocalypse, and the chapter concludes by elucidating the properties that enable the illuminated book to function as a tool of primitivist counterrevolution.

"The Primeval Priests Assum'd Power"

Blake's oral mythology encounters the idea of literacy in the person of Urizen, "the archetypal maker of books," as Paul Mann has called him (Mann 49).The prophetic poem that bears Urizen's name is the most biblio-centric of Blake's poems, "a book about books," in which "[b]ookish forms confront us everywhere" (Mann 49). Printed in the two-column style of scripture and divided into chapter and verse, *The Book of Urizen* mimics biblical format even as it tells of the creation of the first books, Urizen's own "books formd of metals" (E 72). These heavy books of silver, gold, iron and brass embody both Urizen's temperament, his yearning for solidity and fixity, and his philosophy of moralistic materialism. The books are his sole companions during his long journey (in *The Four Zoas*) through the Abyss of his own creation, and are the first things he retrieves when he wakes from temporary death (E 348). Perhaps the clearest statement of his relationship with literacy is found on the title page of *The Book of Urizen*. Here Blake portrays him simultaneously writing two books (one with each hand) and reading a third (using his feet to mark his place and turn pages). His closed eyes signify his spiritual blindness, while the Mosaic tablets behind him suggest the false "laws of peace, of love, of unity" generated by his self-contemplation (E 72).

Blake's "persistent implication of Urizen in books," as Mann puts it, places literacy at the heart of the complex body of meaning this figure represents (Mann 49). A short catalogue of some of these meanings may be helpful here. Urizen is one of the four Zoas, an aspect of fallen Albion. As Albion is simultaneously the individual, England, and humanity itself, Urizen is both a psychic and a social principle, the mental faculty and public spirit of reasoning and systemization. Urizen believes himself to be fully autonomous, however, "God from Eternity to Eternity" (E 307). Motivated by a combination of pity and lust for power, he constantly seeks to establish a utopia of moral law and materialistic philosophy under his own control. Thus, when viewed from the perspective of his own philosophy (whose dominant form in European culture is orthodox Christianity), he is the vengeful, legalistic God of the Old Testament, threatening humanity with physical death and material hellfire. When he becomes a perspective himself in the mind of fallen humanity, "drawn down by Orc and the Shadowy Female into Generation" (E 104), he becomes the strange anti-personification called Satan, "the State of Death & not a Human Existence," the formless embodiment of error, selfishness, and lust for power (E 199). The implications for Blake's theory of literacy are obvious: if Urizen is deeply implicated in books, books are deeply implicated in everything that is Urizen.

The nature of this mutual implication is most easily visible in Blake's mythologized historical narrative. This narrative takes a number of varying forms, but all are structured by an account of the Fall of humanity from a state of primeval innocence.

This Fall is closely associated with the ascension of Urizen to self-proclaimed godhood and the subsequent establishment of a regime of materialistic philosophy and moral law. *The Book of Urizen* tells this story from the perspective of the narrating Eternals, who witness the spontaneous formation of "a shadow of horror" in the otherwise peaceful world of Eternity (E 70). This shadow is Urizen, and his first acts are the creation of a material universe, "a wide world of solid obstruction," and the subsequent writing of the metallic books whose laws will govern this world (E 72). When the "Book of brass" is unclasped and the world exposed to its contents, a cataclysmic struggle begins between Urizen and the other Eternals (in particular, Los). This struggle ends with the descent of the Net of Religion upon the cities of humanity and the establishment of a universal philosophy of materialism (E 82-3). The practical consequences of these events are explored in *The Song of Los*. Here Urizen takes a much more direct role in establishing earthly society, giving his "Laws to the Nations" by means of Los's children (E 67). These laws form the basis of a "Philosophy of Five Senses" (E 68) and the foundation of the oppressive structures of Church and State, the "Churches: Hospitals: Castles: Palaces / Like nets & gins & traps to catch the joys of Eternity" (E 67). This process is further elaborated in *The Four Zoas*. During the seventh Night, Urizen identifies himself as a political and spiritual revolutionary, destroyer of an earlier "time of Prophecy" which "is now revolvd" (E 360). Having generated the Web of Religion in the sixth Night (E 350), he now builds "Trades and Commerce," creating slavery and the internal economy of the "Universal Empire" (E 360-1). The construction of the temple of sexual religion soon follows, and the future of humanity is determined, "The day for war the night for secret religion" (E 361).

We can gain some perspective on the meaning of these myths by comparing them to the non-mythologized history of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Human culture began with "the ancient Poets," Blake here explains, who "animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses" (E 38). This is "the time of Prophecy" terminated by Urizen's rise, the creative Eden soon to be replaced by Universal Empire. The birth of this empire is described in *Marriage* as a kind of *theft*. The creative works of the ancient poet-prophets are appropriated by interlopers who "enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental dieties from their objects" (E 38). When we consider the implications of this act, we see why Blake considered this a crucial moment in cultural history. The abstraction of the mental deity from its sensible object (and the subsequent reification of the abstracted deity) signals the death of anthropomorphic philosophy and the birth of materialist philosophy. The Human Forms once used to conceptualize sensible objects are converted into abstract gods, while "sensible objects," now stripped of living form, must now be reconceptualized as dead matter, "a wide world of solid obstruction" (E 72). Humanity has moved from Eden to Ulro, from a living universe to a dead one. It begins to imagine itself as a race of "reptile forms" of material flesh, "bound down to earth / by their narrowing perception" and ruled by unreachable abstract deities (E 83). Blake contends that the thieves of imagination who instigate this change are motivated by the desire for power, and their final act is to establish their own position in this materialistic hell, claiming privileged access to the invisible deities they have created. "[T]hus began Priesthood," Blake concludes, "choosing forms of worship from poetic tales" (E 38). In the terms of Blake's mythology, this is the beginning of the reign of Urizen, “the primeval Priest” who “assum’d power” by remaking the world in the image of his own dark contemplations (E 70).

The Book of Urizen suggests that these priestly contemplations are harmless as long as they exist solely in Urizen’s imagination, tormenting only their creator. But when the brass book is opened and they become available to the world, the “seven deadly sins of the soul” and “an ocean of voidness unfathomable” are created, rending Eternity in two (E 73). The book, then, is the instrument of Urizen’s power, propagator of the dark morality of Priesthood and destroyer of the “time of Prophecy.” This is suggested most vividly in *Europe*, where Blake compresses his mythological narrative of the Fall into a single image: the opening of Urizen’s brazen book and its expansion to cover the earth in gloom (E 64). The shadow of the “primeval Priests” book is the darkness of Enitharmon’s Night, and the brazen book itself, “That Kings & Priests had copied on Earth” (E 64), is the original of the earthly scriptures that regulate the terrors of the fallen world. Words copied from Urizen’s book are inscribed on every home, branding the human race as slaves of literate Kings and Priests:

> Enitharmon laugh’d in her sleep to see (O womans triumph)
> Every house a den, every man bound; the shadows are filled
> With spectres, and the windows wove over with curses of iron:
> Over the doors Thou shalt not; & over the chimneys Fear is written (E 64)

Books and writing are thus intimately connected with the rise of Priesthood, the fall of the ancient poets, and indeed, the fall of the human race into error and misery.[1] In *Europe*, the rise of Church and State is quite literally the fall of humanity into the shadow of a book.

Blake's historical narrative can be seen as a variation of the standard eighteenth-century theory of the ancient transition from orality to literacy. It was widely believed (on the evidence of classical tradition) that Egyptian hieroglyphic script was the earliest form of writing, and that it had been created by priests as a means of consolidating their authority. William Warburton describes the theory in *The Divine Legation of Moses* as "that which makes the *Hieroglyphics* to be invented by the *Egyptian* Priests, in order to hide and secrete their Wisdom from the Knowledge of the Vulgar" (Warburton 66). "This is the general Sentiment of Antiquity; and is generally embraced by modern Writers," he states (66). Warburton disagreed with this theory, calling it a "universal mistake" (66), but his more nuanced view, predecessor of our modern theories of the origin of writing, also assigns to Priesthood a sinister role in the early evolution of writing. For Warburton, the earliest writing is simple picture-writing. This was invented for practical, everyday use. The pressures of practical application soon push this script in the direction of simplification, and it develops naturally into hieroglyphics, and finally into alphabetic forms. When this last transformation occurs, the general public gradually forgets the meaning of the older hieroglyphic script, making it useful as a priestly cipher. Thus "that which had its Origin from *Necessity*, came, in time, to be employed for *Secresy*" and was "turned into Mystery" (143).

---

[1] We may also note here the Shadowy Female's garment of cruelty, which explicitly links writing, human misery, and state power. Described in *Milton*, this garment has "Kings inwoven upon it, & Councellors & Mighty Men" (E 111), but its primary ornament is writing: "I will have Writings written all over it in Human Words," states the Female, "That every Infant that is born upon the Earth shall read / And get by rote as a hard task of a life of sixty years" (E 111). Submission to aristocratic, militaristic systems of thought (supported by Priesthood, for the Female divides into Rahab and Tirzah [E 111]) is here identical to the "hard task" of internalizing the Female's written words. The garment thus clearly reflects the politicized view of literacy offered in both the Urizen myths and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. See also John B. Pierce's "Rewriting Milton" for a reading of the Female's garment in the terms of modern psychological theories of orality and literacy (Pierce 451-455).

Blake was thus hardly unique in linking Priesthood to the origin of literacy and the fall of primitive oral culture. Either version of this story might be represented by the events in *The Book of Ahania,* for Blake indicates in this short myth his own conviction that writing is the food of the Tree of Mystery. Having planted the seeds of the tree with his tears, Urizen sits beneath it, writing "in silence his book of iron / Till the horrid plant bending its boughs / Grew to roots when it felt the earth / And again sprung to many a tree" (E 86-7). The Tree grows as Urizen writes; the reproductive fecundity of the written (and especially the printed) word here manifests itself in the "horrid" fecundity of the Tree of Mystery. When Urizen finally extricates himself from the tangled grove he has created, the book of iron remains behind at the heart of the ever-spreading "labyrinth of woe" (E 87). It seems no coincidence that when Urizen faces his book to the reader in the illustrations to *The Book of Urizen*, the writing is an unreadable script resembling Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Another important element of Blake's theory of the transition from orality to literacy is that it postulates that this transition is partly defined by the priestly appropriation of the anthropomorphic "mental dieties" (E 38) that animated the living oral cosmos. These Human Forms, raw material of the new culture of Priesthood, are transformed into distant, vengeful gods ruling over a universe of dead flesh and particles. This argument obviously has a number of uniquely Blakean elements, but in its general outlines it bears a noteworthy resemblance to the theories proposed by John Brown in his *Dissertation.* Like most theorists of his age, Brown takes the position that the advent of literacy was closely associated with the rise of Priesthood. Brown departs, however, from the "universal mistake" of attributing the invention of writing to conspiring priests, envisioning it instead as a neutral technology which naturally and gradually weakens the social authority of the oral bard and displaces it on to a new class of literate priests. These priests create a new political culture out of materials extracted from the oral tales of the bards. "During the early Periods of Civilization," Brown writes, "the *legislative* Art is always of an *imperfect* Form. In the rude Progress of barbarous Manners, the *moral* Ideas are *confined*, and little distinguished" (Brown 79). The "Use of *Letters*" (36) encourages the intellectual leaders of society to begin isolating and extracting useful ideas from oral tradition's integrated mixture of history, morality, legend and song. "Their most ancient *Maxims, Exhortations, Proverbs* or *Laws* . . . would naturally make a Part of their *Songs* of Celebration," Brown observes, "and would by Degrees be *selected* from thence, would in Time become the *Standard* of *Right* and *Wrong*" (38). Preserved as written verse, these maxims would be "treasured up, and appealed to by the improving Tribe" (38). The keepers of this treasure would be the "Priest and Priestess" (38), who evolve into non-musical guardians of morality as time obscures the performative origin of their literate trust. The result of this process is the complete divorce of morality from the situational context of oral narrative. It becomes abstract law, and is preserved in books whose interpretation is the domain of the new class of literate lawgivers. The final stage of the transition occurs when the scribal priests create systems of abstract philosophy and theology from the moral materials taken from oral tradition. This can only occur after the invention of literacy, "For in the Period of savage Manners, the Power of *abstract Reasoning* is always *weak*, and is often found to have *no place*" (54). The exhortations and maxims of bardic culture, now removed from a dramatic context and converted into abstract rational principles, become "the Foundation of *private Morals* and *public Law*" (Brown 39). According to Brown, the driving force behind this entire process is society's natural desire to move towards greater security and stability. Literacy fosters social stability by allowing moral traditions to be isolated, clarified, and preserved in permanent written form. The oral bard loses almost all of his social authority in the course of this transition; "[T]he complex Character of *Legislator* and *Bard* would *separate*," writes Brown (41). Supplanted by the scribal priest, the bard degenerates into a mere entertainer.

For both Brown and Blake, bardic culture is destroyed by a literate priestly culture constructed from its ruins. Brown, like most Enlightenment theorists, considers this process generally "improving" (38), and laments only that the separation of music and morality has weakened both. Blake, however, views the rise of the scribal priest not as natural *evolution*, but as political *revolution*. The pillaging of myth for the materials of abstract morality is a part of a social *coup d'état* whose goal is the creation of Universal Empire, an unbreakable mental structure that stifles all creativity and spontaneity to maintain itself as an immutable "solid without fluctuation" (E 71). The transition from orality to literacy is thus part of an eternal (and ongoing) struggle, for as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* indicates, the opposing characters of bard and priest are simply social expressions of two "portion[s] of being," one which creates, and one which appropriates these creations for its own purposes (E 40). These, of course, are "the Prolific" and "the Devouring" (E 40). The bard is the model of the Prolific, creating poetic tales by spontaneous oral inspiration, giving form to Energy which is "Eternal Delight" (E 34). The priest is the model of the Devouring, stealing the forms into which Energy flows so that they might be locked into a structure of pure Order. While Brown sees Priesthood as growing naturally, even inevitably, out of social changes for which literacy is simply a catalyst, Blake's conspiratorial primitivism portrays literacy not as a catalyst but as a *weapon* whose invention changes the balance of power in the eternal struggle between Prolific and Devourer. This moment is poetically dramatized in *The Book of Ahania*. Here the invention of writing becomes an actual weapon in the hands of the primeval priest Urizen, who slays his energetic, Orc-like son Fuzon with a "poisoned rock" (E 85) which falls to earth as Mount Sinai (E 86). While this rock is commonly interpreted as the Mosaic law (Bloom 908, Galatians 4:25), we know from *Jerusalem* that Blake subscribed to the theory that "mysterious Sinais awful cave" is also the place where God "To Man the wond'rous art of writing gave" (E 145). Writing and abstract moral law are therefore born simultaneously, a double weapon to combat the living oral Energy embodied in Fuzon's weapon, the "sounding beam" which "laugh[s]" aloud in "exulting flam'd" vitality (E 84).[1]

The qualities that make literacy an effective weapon are suggested in the complex symbolism of the Tree of Mystery and the poisoned rock of Sinai. The Tree symbolizes obscurity, confusion, the "tangled roots" of "Dark disputes and artful teazing" described in "The Voice of the Ancient Bard" (E 31). Writing contributes to the creation of obscurity in a number of ways. The first of these is implied in the theory that the earliest forms of writing were created to secure a priestly monopoly on spiritual knowledge. Writing turns language into a sort of secret code, a technology requiring specialized education. Thus in newly literate societies, "[w]riting is often regarded at first as an instrument of secret and magic power," observes Walter Ong (Ong, *Orality* 93). Pictographic scripts, such as Egyptian hieroglyphics (and Urizen's symbols, which appear to be modelled on hieroglyphics) are particularly useful tools of political domination. Ong notes that these writing systems are "intrinsically elitist," requiring "protracted leisure" to master due to the large number of symbols they contain (92). Writing thus creates obscurity quite naturally, dividing society into the literate, who have access to the full range of their society's cultural resources, and the illiterate, who do not.

---

[1] It seems probable that the poison on Urizen's rock is ink, since it comes from the body of one of Urizen's serpent-monsters. The scales of these serpents are "iron and brass," the material of Urizen's books (E 346). Note also that if this reading of the Sinai-rock is correct, the "forms of dark delusion" Moses beholds on Sinai in *The Song of Los* may be the first written letters (E 67).

The rampant fecundity of the Tree of Mystery suggests further possibilities. As we have seen, theorists of Blake's time agree that abstract philosophy and rational speculation begin with the introduction of literacy. Preserved in writing, these abstractions and speculations accumulate, creating increasingly complex theoretical systems that grow both with time and with the spread of literacy. The limitations of memory impose a certain economy of thought on oral cultures, but literate cultures know no such limits. Thus the "pained root" of Mystery grows into a vast thicket as Urizen sits writing in the book of iron, and "He beheld himself compassed round / And high roofed over with trees" (E 86, 87). Once sprouted, the Tree never stops growing: "The Tree still grows over the Void / Enrooting itself all around / An endless labyrinth of woe!" (E 87). The "dismal shade" of the Tree of Mystery (E 87) is the "Universal Darkness" of Pope's *Dunciad*, the intellectual chaos that replaces culture as ever-growing legions of writers "explain a thing 'till all men doubt it, / And write about it, Goddess, and about it" (Pope, *Dunciad* 702, 686).

The identification of writing as a poisoned rock (a mountain, in fact) suggests that writing also has a lethal heaviness, a dangerous weight and solidity. These seem to be the essential qualities, too, of Urizen's "books formed of metals" (E 72). These heavy objects embody the drive towards stasis and durability that characterizes the Devouring temper of the primeval priest, who wishes to freeze the energetic flux of life into a single unchangeable structure of abstract law, a "wide world of solid obstruction" as Urizen approvingly calls it (E 72). The apparent motive for this drive towards universal stasis is pity, but as the opening pages of *The Book of Urizen* demonstrate, Blake sees pity as the product of self-contemplation. Pity for others is *self*-pity, a Devouring appropriation of the spontaneous energy of sympathy. When we pity, Blake implies, we use the name of sympathy to disguise a very different emotion. We do not *feel with* the other, but instead imagine ourselves in the other's position, and pity ourselves. Sympathy (or love) is the virtue to which vice pays homage as the pitying one (in this case, Urizen) creates an ideology that aspires to eliminate suffering, but whose true purpose is self-protection. For Blake, the ideologies of pity are a mask for an unquenchable will to power, a yearning for control and safety that would gladly extinguish every form of energy and vitality in its quest to create a "joy without pain . . . a solid without fluctuation" (E 72). Thus we see that when Urizen reads from his heavy brass book in Night the Seventh of *The Four Zoas*, the contents are a manual for political hypocrisy, for the brutal exercise of power in the name of love: "So shall ye govern over all let Moral Duty tune your tongue / But let your hearts be harder than the nether millstone" (E 355).

Pity and the drive towards solidity are closely psychologically related, and together they motivate the transition from bardic to scribal culture. We may note again that Blake is not so far from his contemporaries. The scribal priests described by Brown are also motivated by the desire for stability and security. But Brown is a neoclassicist, and thinks it quite natural and reasonable for societies to sacrifice raw vitality for regulated stability. Blake, on the other hand, sees the desire for regulated stability is a hypocrite's mask for self-pity, and the sacrifice of Energy for Order as a deliberate act of Mental War. This is why Urizen's brazen book, the original manual of Priesthood, contains the wish "That Los may evaporate and be no more" (E 355). Here the heavy metallic book (embodiment of the desire for solidity that created it) openly calls for the annihilation of ephemeral, ever-renewing oral prophecy. In Blake's myth, it very nearly succeeds: the brazen book looms over the world in *Europe* like a metallic roof, casting the silencing shadows of Enitharmon's night, when the harps are unstrung, and human ears, "the ever-varying spiral ascents to the heavens of heavens/ Were bended downward" (E 63). The heaviness, the fixity, the static solidity of literacy are what make it such an effective weapon against the spontaneous energies of orality.

This solidity comes from the permanence of the written word, its nature as a physical artifact bound to a material location. In this respect it is very different from the oral word, which vanishes even as it is spoken. As Ong points out, "I cannot have all of a word present at once: when I say 'existence,' by the time I get to the '-tence', the 'exis-' is gone" (Ong, *Orality* 91). The written word, on the other hand, is *thought made material*, the realization of Urizen's dream of giving solid form to the products of self-contemplation. When Theotormon, in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, asks Oothoon "what is a thought? & of what substance is made?" (E 47), the answer (which Oothoon does not give, being a daughter of Los) is that thoughts have substance when they are given material form as ink and paper. The written word thus embodies in its very nature the Devouring philosophy of the priests. As the culture of Priesthood appropriates the products of spontaneous oral inspiration and locks them into place as substantive objects in a materialist universe, the written word appropriates oral expression and locks it into place on a material page. Orality (energetic and ephemeral) and literacy (ordered and fixed) are metaphors for the world-views with which they are associated.

The relationship of literacy and materialism is emphasized in Blake's dual vision of the written word as simultaneously rocky and metallic, and formlessly organic. Throughout Blake's myth, these are the two principles that define the fallen world of materialist philosophy. We see this, for example, in *The Book of Urizen*, where Urizen's world of "petrific abominable chaos" (E 71) nevertheless teems with "vast enormities . . . portions of life" (E 81). In the third chapter of *Jerusalem*, the newborn material universe is described as "A World of Generation continually Creating; out of / The Hermaphroditic Satanic World of rocky destiny," while the activity of the Veil of Vala (Nature) is to simultaneously "Vegetate & Petrify" the Earth (E 208). Literacy and materialism are connected in the historical myth, as well, as in *The Song of Los*, where the "Philosophy of the Five Senses" given by Urizen to the earliest priests does not reach perfection until it passes into the hands of Newton and Locke (E 68). Blake would not have been surprised to see that Newton's own approach to textuality exemplifies the perceptual model that Blake attributed to him. Donald Ault's studies of Newton suggest that the mathematician embraced the idea of the literate text's materiality with remarkable vigor. Believing as he did that the universe was ruled by "a God of order," Newton seems to have felt that a writer could imitate this divine orderliness by imposing a strict regime of "Rules of Interpretation" on his reader (qtd. in Ault 161-62). For Newton, words are material objects whose use can be tightly controlled as God himself controls the larger material order of the cosmos. "In [Newton's] Biblical exegesis the gap between the literal word and the meaning disappears," observes Ault (162). That is to say, when the philosophy of the primeval priest is perfected in the hands of Newton, the word and all of its possible meanings crystallize into a single material object controlled by the priestly interpreter. Newtonian literacy completes the oral word's appropriation by priestly materialism, whose goal stands revealed as "establish[ing] a coercive relationship between reader and text" (162). The mechanism of this relationship, and the means by which it is established, are examined in the next section.

The Conspiracy to Solidify the Word

Blake's vision of history as a conspiracy of priests and hereditary aristocrats owes much to his youthful immersion in political radicalism. His foregrounding of literacy's role in that conspiracy and his emphasis on the *materiality* of the written word are also reflected in the radical thought of the age. It will be useful to compare Blake's theory of history to that proposed by Thomas Paine in *The Age of Reason*. Not only was Paine the most influential radical thinker of this period, but Blake's response to Paine's book is recorded in the marginalia to Watson's *Apology for the Bible*. Furthermore, the question at issue in *The Age of Reason* (and in the *Apology*) is the authority of the Christian Bible.

No question could be closer to Blake's heart, for he stood passionately on both sides. As a primitivist and an artist, he valued the Bible as the world's oldest specimen of genuine prophetic myth. As a political radical, however, he hated it as the foundation of eighteen hundred years of priestly tyranny. The Bible is both the "Great Code of all Art" (E 256) and the earthly copy of Urizen's brazen book, the world's greatest oral revelation and its most oppressive literate text. More than any other text, it embodies the complexities of Blake's theories of history and textuality. The Paine-Watson debate on the Bible is perhaps the ideal context in which to examine these theories, allowing us to observe as Blake applies them to the primitivist text that was the inspiration and model for his own prophetic art.

Thomas Paine's position in this debate may be easily summarized: the Bible is unambiguously a weapon of priestcraft, and its demolition is both a duty and a pleasure. "I have now gone through the Bible, as a man would go through a wood with an axe on his shoulder, and fell trees," he writes. "Here they lie; and the priests, if they can, may replant them" (Paine, *Age* 151). The most formidable of the many priests who responded to that challenge was Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff. Watson was also Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, well-versed in Biblical scholarship, and a dedicated latitudinarian, unique among Paine's critics in crediting the radical writer with good intentions and even a share of "philosophical sublimity" (Watson 128). But for all his open-mindedness, the Bishop understood that Paine's "grand attack upon the Bible" was more than an exercise in textual criticism (Watson 12). Showing a sharp understanding of the political dimensions of the print marketplace, Watson observes that the readers most likely to take up Paine's book are the middle and lower sections of the commercial class, "the merchants, manufacturers and tradesmen of the kingdom" who are particularly prone to radicalism (145). "I pray God that the rising generation of this land may be preserved from that 'evil heart of unbelief,' which has brought ruin on a neighbouring nation," concludes the Bishop, linking mass literacy, infidelity, and Jacobinism in the standard manner of Romantic-era conservative writers (145). By calling attention to the seditious nature of Paine's attempt to discredit the Bible, however, Watson implicitly acknowledges the validity of his method, and admits that Church and State are indeed "calculated for mutual support," and lean together upon the authority of a single piece of text (Paine, *Age* 191). The battle to preserve the established order must therefore be fought on the fields of textual criticism, and the argument between the Bishop and the radical turns into a debate about the possibility of an authoritative literate text.

Paine believed that such a text was impossible. "[T]he idea or belief of a word of God existing in print, or in writing, or in speech, is inconsistent in itself" because a benevolent deity would never commit his word to such fragile and manipulable media (83). As Paine states the case,

> The continually progressive change to which the meaning of words is subject, the want of an universal language which renders translation necessary, the errors to which translations are again subject, the mistakes of copyists and printers, together with the possibility of wilful alteration, are of themselves evidences that human language, whether in speech or in print, cannot be the vehicle of the word of God. (38)

Since the Bible (like the scriptures of all religions) is composed of human language, Paine dismisses it as untrustworthy. For Paine, language is always in flux, always part of an active and evolving human context. To accept the authority of the Bible is therefore to place one's faith in the honesty and competence of an unknown group of authors, editors, copyists and printers. The socially situated nature of language compels us to look instead to a text no human hand or tongue can manipulate: "It is only in the CREATION that all our ideas and conceptions of a *word of God* can unite" (46). The natural world is accessible to everyone, tells us everything we need to know about God, and most importantly, is immune to chance and politics. "Search not the book called the scripture, which any human hand might make, but the scripture called the Creation," writes Paine, for the latter "cannot be forged; it cannot be counterfeited; it cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed" (46).

Paine's enthusiasm for the incorruptible text of Nature betrays the variety of his own experiences with the written word. Like few before or since, he had wielded the power of literacy (amplified by the printing press) in *Common Sense* (1776), the *American Crisis* papers (1780-83), and later *The Rights of Man* (1791-92). In his posthumously published response to Watson's *Apology*, the "Reply to the Bishop of Llandaff" (1810), Paine speaks of writing and printing with almost religious enthusiasm. Printing "gives to man a sort of divine attribute," he writes; "It gives to him mental omnipresence. He can be everywhere and at the same instant, for wherever he is read he is mentally there" (Paine, "Reply" 77). So powerful is the printing press that Paine argues its absence in Biblical times proves that Christianity is false, for "had God ever delivered any verbal word, He would have taught the means of communicating it" (78). This beneficial power is tempered, however, by what Paine saw as the malleability and passivity of the written and printed word. "The words are passive to every transposition of them, or can be annihilated and others put in their places," he warns (79). Paine's writing had often been a victim of this passivity. As he notes in Part II of *The Age of Reason*, the first Part had been significantly altered by unknown printers and editors in the two years since its first publication. A sentence concerning the biblical book of Luke (stating that it had been adopted as canonical by a single vote) had not only been inserted without Paine's knowledge, but was replicated in all editions derived from the altered version. As Paine observes, "It may be true, but it is not I that have said it" (Paine, *Age* 171). The inserted statement was used by Paine's critics (notably Joseph Priestley) to discredit him, as were a number of other printer's errors and planted misstatements (Conway 14). Paine had experience of far more aggressive attempts at political manipulation of the literate text. Both *The Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason* were banned outright by government order, and Paine was convicted *in absentia* of seditious libel for having written the former. Although the State was never completely successful in censoring Paine (publication of *The Age of Reason* "became something of a suicidal crusade with certain radical publishers and printers," notes Marcus Wood [Wood 138]), defiant anti-Christians like Daniel Isaac Eaton continued to demonstrate the validity of Paine's critique of literacy by earning prison terms for blasphemous libel well into the Regency era.

Thus even as he grants literacy semi-divine powers, Paine argues from personal experience that the written word is given too much credence, that readers are insufficiently aware of literacy's limitations and weaknesses. This makes them susceptible to the machinations of priests, says Paine, who inevitably preach a false, hypocritical doctrine of textuality. Motivated by self-interest, they teach the public to believe in the authority of the written word, even though this word is useful to them precisely because it is *not* truly fixed, because it can be manipulated at every stage of its creation and reproduction. Thus the written word (particularly when disseminated widely by the printing press) is the perfect instrument of religious despotism, for the priests of all nations "cannot lay hold of religion as an engine but by mixing it with human inventions, and making their own authority a part," Paine writes (190). The final element of this conspiracy to solidify the word is the priests' self-installation as scholars and interpreters of the written text. In deriving their own places and perquisites from a text they created and control (the Deuteronomical text on tithing is Paine's example here), the priests complete the circle of their textual logic.

Perhaps because *An Apology for the Bible* is intended as a reply to Part II of *The Age of Reason* (Watson admits to not having read the earlier Part), it barely addresses Paine's broader textual argument, which is developed fully only in Part I. Instead, the bishop devotes his energies to refuting the catalogue of Biblical contradictions and errors that comprise the body of Part II. Many of these quibbles were familiar to religious scholars, and Florence Sandler notes that "[f]or the most part Watson is exasperated by Paine's ignorance" of the generally accepted answers (Sandler 58). Watson comes closest to responding to Paine's theory of literate fixity as political conspiracy in Letter V of the *Apology*, in which he accuses Paine of holding the Bible to an unreasonable standard of perfection, and calls on him to "reconcile these apparent contradictions, by the rules of such sound criticism as he would use in examining the contents of any other book"

(Watson 63). Judged by this standard, the Bible displays "an harmony and connection, utterly inconsistent with every idea of forgery and deceit," writes the bishop (63). Watson does not acknowledge that this standard is precisely the target of Paine's attack, however. *No* written or printed word can be "inconsistent with every idea of forgery and deceit," argues Paine, because of "the possibility of totally suppressing such a word; the probability of altering it; or of fabricating the whole, and imposing it on the world" (Paine, *Age* 80). Although Watson was the most learned and credible of *The Age of Reason*'s many critics (and the only one to whom Paine responded), his *Apology* is greatly weakened by its failure to address Paine's most damaging argument. This may be why the "Reply to the Bishop of Llandaff" concludes by emphatically restating this point, arguing once again that the Bible's most serious weakness is that, unlike the "scripture of Creation," it is incapable of "resisting alteration" (Paine, "Reply" 80).

Blake recognized Watson's failure. "I have read this book with attention & find that the Bishop has only hurt Paines heel while Paine has broken his head," he writes. "[T]he Bishop has not answered one of Paines grand objections" (E 620). In particular, Blake notes that Watson avoids facing Paine's contention that "the Bible is all a State Trick" (616). To Blake, this is simply more evidence of "Priestly Impudence" (E 612). As a priest, the bishop is a natural Devourer who brazenly defends what he knows in his heart to be a false position. Sandler, however, contends that Blake's marginalia similarly avoid the implications of Paine's argument. He, too, is a Christian, she observes, and "[a]fter Paine's grand objections, Blake is left only with the shreds of the Bible littered around him" (Sandler 64). Yet this does not prevent Blake from claiming that his defense of Paine is, in fact, a defense of the Bible. "It is an easy matter for a Bishop to triumph over Paines attack but it is not so easy for one who loves the Bible," he states (E 611). Nor does it prevent him from using the Bible to support Paine's assault on that very text, as he does throughout the annotations. Blake is horrified, for example, by Watson's defense of the Old Testament slaughter of the Canaanites, and counters by citing Christ's New Testament abolition of the "Jewish Imposture" that justified such crimes (E 614). But in citing Christ in defense of Paine, Blake seems to ignore Paine's dismissal of the New Testament as a tissue of anecdotes and lies founded in the dubious prophecies of the Old Testament (Paine, *Age* 152). This is only one of many similar paradoxes of Blake's annotations, and for Sandler, they indicate that as of 1798, Blake's theory of the Bible was fundamentally incoherent. If Watson has not been able to defend the Bible from Paine, she writes, "neither has his Annotator" (Sandler 63). The paradoxes of the marginalia, however, simply manifest the deep ambivalence about the Bible permeating the poems and prophecies of this period. Blake had claimed in *All Religions Are One*, for example, that "The Jewish and Christian Testaments are An original derivation from the Poetic Genius" (E 1). In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* on the other hand, the Bible is a "deep pit" filled with grinning cannibal monkeys (E 42). Blake is both the Bible's staunchest supporter ("To defend the Bible in this year 1798 would cost a man his life" [E 611]) and a critic more harsh even than Paine.

The Material and Spiritual Bibles

This paradox is resolved by a curious duality in the nature of the Bible itself. Blake makes this clear in his note to the bishop's remark that the "jewish and christian dispensations" are "mediums to convey to all men, through all ages, that knowledge concerning himself, which he had vouchsafed to give immediately to the first" (Watson 11). The bishop here expresses his belief that the Biblical text can provide the same authoritative knowledge of God as that possessed by the ancient prophets. Blake's response is indignant: "The Bible or Peculiar Word of God, Exclusive of Conscience or the Word of God Universal, is that Abomination which like the Jewish ceremonies is for ever removed" (E 615). That is to say, when the *material text* of the Bible, a single (or *peculiar*) combination of written symbols, is considered as the entirety of the Bible, the text becomes the modern equivalent of the ceremonies of ancient priestcraft. The material text must be supplemented by "Conscience, or the Word of God Universal," a spiritual communication with no peculiar (i.e., single, fixed, material) form. Conscience, in fact, is an *oral* medium, "the voice of God" (E 613). Guided by this voice, Blake can quote the Bible against the bishop, stating that "The Bible tells me that the plan of Providence was Subverted at the Fall of Adam & that it was not restored till Christ" (E 615). The bishop's faith in the authority of the material Bible is thus un-Christian and even unbiblical, for it denies the saving role of Jesus, and proposes instead that a material text can restore humanity's lost connection with God. As the modern form of what Blake calls the "Jewish Imposture" (E 614), the material Bible has been abolished by Jesus' demonstration of the unity of man and God, "& henceforth every man may converse with God & be a King & Priest in his own house" (E 615).

We see, then, that Blake can quote the Bible in Paine's defense (and even against the Bible itself) because there are *two* Bibles. The Bible defended by Watson and attacked by Paine is a material object, the Urizenic creation of the primeval priests, a sequence of visual symbols reproduced in millions of physical books. Its authoritative status is determined by rational inquiry, by the measured evaluation of historical data and internal narrative properties. The Bible as proposed by Blake is a composite object, a literate text whose meaning is revealed by spiritual, oral dictate, by conversation with God that elevates every receptive reader to the privileged interpretive position formerly held by "King & Priest." This model of textual *reception*, while clearly related to radical Protestant inner-light traditions like those of the Quakers and Anabaptists, is in fact the primitivist counterpart of the dictation model of literary *composition*. As in the dictation model, the literate text finds its proper place as an adjunct to oral revelation. This is particularly important in the case of the Bible because this book of books is the oldest surviving example of the appropriation of ancient oral tales by primeval priests. To read the Bible with the aid of oral inspiration, converting the material into the spiritual Bible, is therefore especially important. The oral tales appropriated by the literate Bible are the Original Philosophy and must be read in their own terms. When they are approached from the perspective of materialist philosophy, as they are by Paine and Watson, they vanish into Derridean weightlessness, their authority dissolving into a mass of historical and linguistic quibbles. The words of the ancient prophets become a textual Rorshach blot, alternately unreadable and readable as anything at all, like the mysterious symbols of Urizen's books. The reasoning Spectre is able to make of this chaos whatever it wills. "I cannot concieve the Divinity of the books in the Bible to consist either in who they were written by or in the historical evidence," writes Blake, "which may be all false in the eyes of one man & true in the eyes of another" (E 618). The divinity of these books is revealed only when they are read through oral inspiration, and the literate Bible (and literacy itself) is *recontextualized* within the anthropomorphic world-view of the ancient bards and prophets. This recontextualization allows the reader (listener) to see the literate Bible in the terms of the oral cosmology it appropriated. That is to say, one reads the material Bible in the light of the spiritual Bible. In the mythological terms of the spiritual Bible, the material Bible is the Abomination abolished by Jesus. In the terms of Blake's own neo-bardic cosmology, it is the totality of Urizen's "books formed of metals," and is abolished in the apocalypse occurring at the end of each of Blake's epic prophecies.

The climactic scenes of *Jerusalem*, for example, vividly demonstrate Blake's vision of literacy's redemption. Newly revived after aeons of death caused by his rejection of Jesus, a joyful Albion walks the heavens "speaking the Words of Eternity in Human Forms" (E 255). Language is oral and human, as it was before his fall and Urizen's rise. Urizen himself is stripped of his pretensions to autonomous godhood and is compelled to labour on behalf of Albion, a useful servant instead of a dangerous would-be master (E 255). He enters into Albion's bosom, and becomes "bright beaming Urizen" whose bow is now "Male & Female," humanized, and no longer formed from the ribs of the serpent-creature of *Ahania* whose inky blood poisons Mount Sinai (E 256). The release of Albion's four-fold bow annihilates the Druid Spectre of materialistic religion and triggers the all-humanizing apocalypse (E 257). During this final transformation of the cosmos, Urizen no longer writes, "regulat[ing] his books" (E 349), but "converses" with the other Zoas "in Visionary forms dramatic which bright / Redounded from their Tongues in thunderous majesty" (E 257). Loosed from the silent stasis of priestly literacy, language becomes the spontaneously appropriate, living medium of the true Orator, "in regenerations terrific or complacent varying / According to the subjects of discourse & every Word & every Character / Was Human" (E 258). The spirit of prophecy regains its primacy, for "the Divine Appearance was the likeness & similitude of Los" (E 255), the eternal prophet and bard, who sang *The Song of Los* "to four harps at the tables of Eternity" (E 67). The conclusion to *Jerusalem* portrays the bardic perspective absorbing, subordinating, and redeeming the literate materialism of Priesthood. Spontaneous human creativity, expressing itself in energetic oral song, is recognized as the visible face of divinity.

The Literate Basis of Deism

In proposing a new vision of literacy as a subordinate medium whose authority derives from oral revelation, Blake reveals that his commitment to a primitivist philosophy is his true point of departure from Paine. As the title of *The Age of Reason* suggests, Paine was a dedicated Lockean, intensely distrustful of religious enthusiasm. "[T]he choicest gift of God to man" is "the GIFT OF REASON," he states (Paine, *Age* 44). The cosmology he advocates is resolutely Newtonian, a "vast machinery" of planets "rolling or at rest in the immense ocean of space" (73). Thus Paine fills Part II of *The Age of Reason* with historical and textual arguments designed to demonstrate the faults, errors and corruptions of the material Bible. Blake is generally unimpressed with this aspect of Paine's argument. According to him, Paine's lengthy catalogue of failed prophecies, scribal errors, and questionable authors is a collection of "trifles" which "it is folly to confute" (E 617). Paine's "more material" objections, aptly enough, are those which emphasize the weakness of the idea that authority can effectually reside in a material text

(E 617). As a Lockean, however, Paine cannot recognize that the oral guidance of Conscience, "the voice of God" (E 613) gives the material text the stability it always sought. "Conscience in those who have it is unequivocal," Blake bluntly states (E 613) in response to Watson's similarly Lockean defense of Reason over Conscience (Watson 3).

Blake's differences from Paine on questions of textuality are therefore important and revealing. Insofar as Paine recognizes and exposes the Devouring spirit behind the material Bible and attacks its illusory solidity, Blake follows and agrees. This antipathy to the Devouring spirit might be called the essence of political radicalism. It appears in Blake's mythology as Orc, the energy of rebellion. But Orc alone is no match for Urizen, as we see in the Seventh Night of *The Four Zoas*. At the very moment of his apparent triumph over Urizen, Orc becomes what he opposes, organizing for himself "a Serpent body," and "turning affection into fury & thought into abstraction" (E 356). He becomes a "Self consuming dark devourer" and is compelled by Urizen to climb the Tree of Mystery, there to "draw all human forms / Into submission to his will" (E 356). Thus Paine, while "a better Christian than the Bishop" (E 620), remains very much a victim of the priestly perspective. According to *The Song of Los*, Locke and Newton represent the apogee of priestly philosophy, and Paine's failure to recognize the connection between literate priestcraft and their systematic philosophy of materialism means that he repeats their error, and his rebellious energy sputters out in Deism. The connection, of course, is that the apparent solidity and permanence of the written word embodies a crucial element of the Urizenic dream. This yearning for intellectual fixity is nowhere more clear than in Paine's attempt to find in material Nature the perfect literate text he could not find in the Bible. While Blake sees (or rather, hears) the universe as a symphony of living voices, Paine imagines Nature as an untouchable, permanent, omnipresent written text. Immune to chance or priestly manipulation, this "scripture of Creation" remains an "an ever-existing original, which every man can read" (46). From Blake's perspective, however, this is merely the replacement of one fixed material text by another, and hardly an improvement over Watson's priestly model of textuality. Having stripped the cowl from the Prester Serpent, Paine has elected to worship the Serpent in its true form (E 363). This is Druidism, the universal essence of priestly religion, and as Paine discovered in Robespierre's prison, it was capable of creating a political and mental tyranny far worse than the corrupt, limited monarchy defended by Watson. Indeed, Paine never seems to realize that he is proposing a literate scripture (with attendant moral abstractions, laws and institutions) completely immune to the kind of deconstructive analysis he applies to the Bible. If universally accepted, this Deistic scripture would become the foundation of a new literate tyranny against which there would be no appeal. "You O Deists profess yourselves the enemies of Christianity: and you are so: you are also the Enemies of the Human Race," writes Blake in *Jerusalem* (E 200). For Blake, Deism is an intensification of the worst features of Christian priestcraft, stripping the anthropomorphic God of the Jewish prophets of his last human traits, silencing the last faint echoes of the oral cosmos. Blake must therefore have found it ironic that Paine had actually made use of primitivist theory in his case against the Bible. Paine's discussion of prophecy in the first part of *The Age of Reason* points out that "the word *prophet*, to which later times have affixed a new idea, was the Bible word for poet, and the word *prophesying* meant the art of making poetry . . . it also meant the art of playing poetry to a tune" (Paine, *Age* 36). But for Paine, this is no recommendation. This understanding of the word "strips it of all religious meaning," he states, and "[i]t is altogether unnecessary, after this, to offer any observations upon what those men, stiled prophets, have written" (37).[1] The Lockean spirit triumphs over any nascent primitivism, and Paine (from Blake's point of view) becomes the victim of the perspective he despises.

Blake was undoubtedly inspired by Paine's spirited rebellion against the institutions of priestly authority, but he would probe far more deeply into the philosophical and psychological roots of authoritarian politics, finding its origin in a culturally explosive mixture of new technology and an eternal spiritual principle. Together, the Devouring spirit and the written word gave birth to a philosophy of materialism that overthrew the bardic cosmos and enslaved the human race. Although "the Holy Ghost . . . in Paine strives with Christendom as in Christ he strove with the Jew" (E 356), Paine is ultimately one of these slaves. His love for the stasis embodied in the written word would lead him down the path of Orc, "turning affection into fury & thought into abstraction." In the end, Blake would reluctantly classify his radical comrade among the priests, and identify Deism as the worst of priestly impositions. "The Bishop never saw the Everlasting Gospel any more than Tom Paine," he concludes (E 619).

The Two Bibles in the Poetry of the 1790's

The distinction between the Blakean composite Bible and the priestly material Bible is crucial to our understanding of the politically charged poetry of the 1790's. The political and spiritual dangers of the priestly Bible and the necessity of its redemption by oral inspiration are themes integral to much of this work. The mythological poetry explores these themes in terms of the Urizen myth, but in order to demonstrate their centrality to Blake's philosophy, it will be worthwhile to track their presence in works less obviously primitivistic, namely the *Songs of Experience* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.*

---

[1] Paine here exemplifies the dismissive view of poetry lamented by John Brown, who, as we saw earlier, considered it a side-effect of literacy's extraction of philosophy from oral song.

The *Songs of Experience* open as a celebration of the primitivistic perspective. They are introduced by a fierce, primitive Bard whose first words, "Hear the voice of the Bard!" (E 18) are a traditional oral storyteller's formula (Edwards and Sienkicwicz 40). His next words are an invocation of an anthropomorphized Earth, in language that echoes the ancient poetry of Jeremaiah 6:19 ("Hear, O Earth"). But where Jeremaiah (in the conventional priestly interpretation) channels the voice of a judgmental Nobodaddy, righteously informing the world of the punishment in store for those who fail to love him, Blake's Bard seeks to revive an Earth who, we learn in "Earth's Answer," has been enslaved by this same "Selfish father of men" (E 18) and bound in chains of "Starry Jealousy" (E 19). That is to say, the personified, speaking Earth is imprisoned by the wrathful God of Jeremaiah 6:19. When we unpack this metaphorically dense Blakean narrative, what we find is that the first lines of the *Songs* suggest a complex strategy of challenge and reclamation. A well-known Biblical text is simultaneously alluded to, condemned as an instrument of oppression, and reimagined as an instrument of liberation, all in the terms of primitivist theory. The Bard reclaims the text through oral inspiration, as manifested in his traditional, oratorical manner of speaking, and in his address to a personified Earth.

Primitivist revisionism continues in the Bard's retelling of the Genesis story; his "ears have heard / The Holy Word / That walk'd among the ancient trees" (E 19). Two Biblical passages are amalgamated here. The "voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8) has merged with the "Word [who] was God" of the New Testament (John 1:1). The Bard describes an Old Testament scene, but the angry God of Jewish priestcraft has been replaced by the forgiving Jesus of the New Testament, whose mission, as Blake claimed, was to "abolish the Jewish Imposture" (E 614). This polemical revision of the Bible is a two-pronged attack on priestly culture. First, by replacing the priestly God with an image of Divine Humanity, Blake reverses the tactics of the primeval priests, who extracted the figure of God from oral primitivist cosmology and turned it into a material bogeyman. Simultaneously, Blake attacks modern priestcraft by demonstrating the truth of Paine's critique of the written and printed Bible. By actually altering the Bible, Blake shows that it truly cannot resist alteration, and cannot therefore be authoritative in itself. It thus *requires* supplementary oral inspiration of the type embodied in the figure of the Bard. The presence of this inspiration in the *Songs* is suggested in the Bard's use of the ambiguous term "Holy Word." That the Bard *hears* the Holy Word (rather than seeing or reading it) indicates that the Holy Word (whether understood as Jesus, or the Bible, or both) is a *spoken* word in the poetic universe of *Songs of Experience*.

The "Introduction" and "Earth's Answer," then, comprehensively reimagine the Bible, suggesting that the material text can participate in its own redemption if approached from a primitivist perspective. When read with the aid of Conscience, the "Word of God Universal" in every individual, the material Bible can become part of a spiritually authoritative whole (E 615). The universality of this oral Word is emphasized in the *Songs* in Blake's decision to made a Celtic-traditional bard the medium of rehabilitated Christian inspiration. This blending of Christian and pagan inspiration reflects Blake's conviction that "All Religions Are One" (E 1), and expresses his rejection of the Lowthian primitivism that would exclude Homer, Ossian, and Blake himself from the body of truly inspired poets. We saw in the preceding chapter how the religiously orthodox interpretation of primitivist theory implicitly postulated a qualitative difference between ancient Jewish enthusiasm and its pagan and modern counterparts, and how the widespread acceptance of this interpretation led Blake's contemporaries to conclude that he was mad. This theory that the spiritual Word is *not* universal is reinforced and justified by the material Bible, which apparently embodies divine authority in a material object that has a clearly defined beginning and end. The ostensible completeness and sufficiency of such a text is a formidable argument against primitivist philosophy. What need for any more prophecy, if the Bible is the unalterable and complete word of God? Thus it is a Celtic bard who redeems the Bible in the *Songs of Experience*, and a new prophecy in the form of the *Songs* themselves is Blake's answer to the Earth's plea to "Break this heavy chain/ That does freeze my bones around" (19). Whether "Earth" is here read to represent the personified universe of oral cosmology, the people of the world (as in Jeremaiah), or even a kind of elemental physical and sexual vitality, the message of the *Songs* is clear. The material Bible propagates the destructive lies of Priesthood while simultaneously denying the possibility of any new and liberating oral revelation. The result is a race, a creation, which groans in chains.

This message is amplified and sustained in a number of the *Songs* themselves. The trinity of evil in "The Chimney Sweeper," for example, is the familiar radical "God & Priest & King" (E 23), while the forces of sexual repression in "The Garden of Love" are "the Priests in black gowns . . . walking their rounds" (E 26). It is a priest who with "trembling zeal" seizes the "Little Boy Lost" and burns him in "a holy place/ Where many had been burn'd before" (E 29). The relationship between the material Bible and the oppression of priestcraft is foregrounded in a number of these poems. This is clear in "A Little Girl Lost." This poem begins by evoking a pastoral Golden Age (always associated with orality, as we have seen in preceding chapters), an age Blake portrays as free from the "Cruel jealous selfish fear" that now dominates the Earth (E 18). The sexual idyll of the early stanzas is cut short when the protagonist encounters her father, and "his loving look, / Like the holy book / All her tender limbs with terror shook" (E 29). The explicitly material "holy book" (as opposed to the ambiguously material and anthropomorphic "Holy Word" of the "Introduction") is here portrayed as the enemy of the "Age of Gold" (E 29). Like her father's "loving look," the Bible is terror in the guise of love. It is, in fact, the material embodiment of the moral hypocrisy of the protagonist's father. The father is eerily Urizenic; not only is he closely associated with a book of moral law, he has "hoary hair" (E 29), and his pitying lament for his child's moral failure echoes Urizen's similar laments in *The Book of Urizen* and *The Four Zoas*. We see, then, that "A Little Girl Lost" is a parable of Blake's theory of history. By juxtaposing a pastoral paradise of sexual Energy with a cold, restrictive regime of book-based priestcraft, Blake simultaneously criticizes the historical process that created this regime, and exposes its effects in every Bible-believing home.

The same theme is treated slightly differently in "The Garden of Love," where a similarly pastoral sexual garden is transformed into a graveyard by a Chapel inscribed with the Mosaic commandment "Thou shalt not" (E 26). Around these words walk "Priests in black gowns" binding the speaker's "joys and desires" (E 26). Significantly, the illustrated plate depicts a priest holding a book while leading two children in prayer. The written word is here presented as the epitaph on the tomb of the pastoral garden, the emblem of the Urizenic drive to bind and constrict. If energy is life, and oral song the expression of living and active Human Form, the written word is death, the petrification of song, an expression of stasis and materiality. Paradoxically, Blake may have found the inspiration for the metaphor of "The Garden of Love" in the Bible itself. He would have been familiar with Paul's admonition to the Corinthians that "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Cor. 3:6). As Walter Ong remarks, however, writing's "close association with death" is traditional, and can be traced from Plato to Robert Browning (Ong, *Orality* 81). Considered in this context, Blake's mythological and metaphoric treatment of the material Bible, "the peculiar Word of God," may be thought of as an examination of the psychological roots and sociopolitical consequences of this association. Here as elsewhere the *Songs of Experience* are harshly satiric, presenting the world created by literate priestcraft as it appears to the hostile eye of a bardic narrator. The material Bible is the centrepiece of that world, its foundation and defense, and must be exposed and redeemed if the Bard is to revive the subjugated Earth. The poems that make up the body of the *Songs* display the damage done, while the exuberant bardic narrative structure proposes the solution, the reconstitution of the material text as a subordinate element of primitive orality.

The Bible in its Diabolic Sense

The format of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is widely recognized as ironic and parodic (of Swedenborg, particularly), but when the book is read in the terms of primitivist theory, the nature of this parody is more clear. *Marriage* is the product of a primitivist, prophetic sensibility operating within the rational parameters of priestly discourse. The structure of the book gives Blake's game away, for *Marriage* opens and closes with anthropomorphic myths that contextualize the parodic explorations of priestly philosophy within. The opening poem expresses the wrath (personified as Rintrah) of the usurped bardic culture, and tells yet another mythologized version of its overthrow by the scribal priests. The "just man," that is to say, the primeval bard, has taken the barrenness of nature and converted it into a garden, having planted roses "where thorns grow" (E 33). This is the activity of the Prolific, "animating all sensible objects" (E 38) and transforming wild chaos into the organic harmony of Eden. The planting of these roses, however, creates "the perilous path" (E 33), for by animating the world imaginatively, the bards have created the raw materials of abstract philosophy. The perilous path of creative imagination is soon usurped by "the villain" who leaves "the paths of ease" to seek power, and "drive[s] / the just man into barren climes" (E 33). Now "the sneaking serpent walks / In mild humility. And the just man rages in the wilds / Where lions roam" (E 33). At the other end of the book, the mythic "Song of Liberty" predicts the birth of Orc and the collapse of the empires of the "sneaking serpents," the scribal priests and their descendants. Their downfall is depicted metaphorically as a rejection and annihilation of written texts, as Orc "Spurning the clouds written with curses, stamps the stony law to dust" (E 45). As part of *Marriage*'s triumphant return to the anthropomorphic myth of bardic culture, this passage manifests the very moment it symbolizes, even as *Marriage* itself manifests the psychological and social transformation (the overthrow of Urizen) it prophesies in the "Song of Liberty."

In the space between bardic culture's fall and rebirth, priestly culture thrives, and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* mirrors this history in its structure. The interior of the book is composed of mystical philosophy in the tradition of Swedenborg. But things are not exactly what they seem; the intellectual order of priestcraft shows signs of tampering. A foreign sensibility has infiltrated this order, stealing its outward forms and infusing them with the energetic spirit of bardic culture. Thus Angels (figures of abstract virtue, in priestly culture) become stuffy prigs, while Devils (figures of the bodily energies that oppose this virtue) become swaggering heroes. To some degree, then, *Marriage* is an act of revenge, for just as the primeval priests appropriated the oral myths of antiquity, adapting them to the purposes of the Devouring spirit, Blake appropriates the forms of literate rationality, adapting them to the purposes of the Prolific or prophetic spirit. The priestly universe of materialistic theology thus becomes a Carrollian looking-glass parody of itself, and the rational narratives in the interior of the book are spiritually inverted to embody the bardic energy of its Argument and conclusion.

In the looking-glass world of *Marriage*'s prose sections, both Angels and Devils read the Bible, and the difference between them is expressed in terms of their approach to the material Biblical text. This is clear in the "Memorable Fancy" in which an Angel and a Devil debate the nature of Jesus' relationship to the Ten Commandments. The Angel takes the orthodox position that Jesus was a human proof-text, a living demonstration of the authority of the Old Testament scripture. The Devil, on the other hand, interprets the Gospels according to his own conviction that "no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments," and contends that Jesus was a living refutation of the idea of scriptural authority (E 43). "Jesus was all virtue," states the Devil, "and acted from impulse, not from rules" (E 43).[1] The "infernal or diabolical sense" of the Bible thus grows out of a reading that imitates Jesus' own rejection of the authority of the written Old Testament law (E 44).

The "diabolical sense" of the Bible can thus be seen to be the primitivist sense *as it appears* within a priestly context. The angelic sense of the Bible, on the other hand, is the literate, priestly sense as it appears from the perspective of the bard-parodist who narrates *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the sense in which the Biblical text becomes the "peculiar" word of God, and reifies (and is simultaneously reified by) a materialist appropriation of the bardic cosmos. The mutual hostility of these two perspectives, and the fundamental place of literacy in the latter, appear vividly in the "Memorable Fancy" in which the Blake-narrator and an Angel take turns showing each other how each appears from the other's point of view (E 41-42). The bardic Blake appears in the Angel's world as a Devil in the shape of an animal sprung from physical corruption (that is, as a human body, viewed from a materialist perspective), who is punished eternally as the prey of "vast spiders" (E 41). When the Angel leaves, Blake again sees from the bardic perspective, and finds himself in a pastoral paradise "sitting on a pleasant bank beside a river by moon light hearing a harper who sung to his harp" (E 42). The Angel, having considered his own perspective to be a material fact founded on the literate authority of the Bible, is surprised at Blake's escape from what appears to him to be Hell. However, "[a]ll that we saw was owing to your metaphysics," explains Blake, who then retaliates, forcing the Angel to see how he himself appears from the bardic perspective (E 42). Using a set of priestly books ("Swedenborgs volumes" [E 42]) to assist him in creating a vision of abstract sterility, Blake carries the Angel off to the Newtonian void "between saturn and the fixed stars" (E 42). This is the site of the Angel's "eternal lot," his position within Eternity, or the universe as envisioned in a bardic cosmology (E 42). Blake then creates another vision, this one centered on the Angel's relationship to the Biblical text. From the bardic perspective, this text (situated on an altar to indicate its place as part of the apparatus of Priesthood) appears as "a deep pit" (E 42) that provides the space within which the institutions of materialistic religion function. These institutions appear as brick houses (that is, churches) filled with "grinning and snatching" cannibalistic monkeys (E 42). This unflattering portrait of the literate clergy reaches its climax when Blake examines one of the fallen bodies, and the skeleton of the dead priest-monkey turns out to be yet another book, Aristotle's *Analytics*. The metaphoric placement of a major text of Greek rationalist philosophy at the core of the priest's body is an echo of Blake's theory that this philosophy helped corrupt the oral tales of ancient Israel into materialistic allegory (E 554). The monkey-priests live (metaphorically) within the dark space of the Bible, but at their core (and therefore at the bottom of the Angel's Bible) is abstract philosophy. Having made clear the connection between literacy,

---

[1] Within the priestly confines of this parody, spontaneous knowledge and motivation have the mechanistic name of "impulse," as elsewhere in the prose parts of *Marriage* they have the similarly Newtonian name of Energy. But when Blake speaks directly from the bardic perspective, as he does in his myths (or even at times in his everyday life), impulse and Energy always appear as the dictate of an oral voice (e.g. the Daughters of Beulah, the Holy Spirit, or even Conscience, "the voice of God," as it is called in the notes to Watson).

Priesthood, and abstract philosophy, Blake ends the vision, and the offended Angel accuses Blake of imposing a "phantasy" upon him (E 42). The Angel can only understand spontaneous imaginative creation (produced without reference to an authoritative text) as fantasy and imposition. The bardic Blake, however, knows that both his vision and the Angel's are imaginative creations, as all philosophies derive from the Poetic Genius (E 1), and answers, "we impose on one another" (E 42). The only question is: Which creation is more conducive to the free expression of Energy, which is Eternal Delight? For Blake, the answer is clear, and "it is but lost time to converse with you whose works are only Analytics" (E 42).

The Bible of Hell

The last prose section of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* ends with a promise and a threat. The world shall have the diabolical sense of the old Bible "if they behave well," promises Blake, but it shall have something new, the Bible of Hell, "whether they will or no" (E 42). To understand the meaning of the word "Hell" in this context, we must remember that Blake is still speaking in prose, a bard temporarily adopting the priestly perspective for parodic purposes. From this perspective, Hell is the dwelling-place of Devils, those souls devoted to Evil, which is "the active springing from Energy" (E 34). Blake himself is such a Devil, and appears this way in the analytic Angel's vision (E 41). Hell, then, is the bardic universe as it appears to priests. Committed as they are to the establishment of static and unbreakable rational structures, priests naturally see the bardic cosmos of spontaneous, fluctuating impulse as horrible and destructive. Immersion in one's own creative energy appears to them as "walking among the fires of hell" (E35). The "enjoyments of Genius" appear as "torment and insanity," since they involve continuous change, the embrace of ephemerality, the unending creation and destruction of imaginative structures (E 35). The priestly or angelic mind is the cistern, which contains, while the bardic or diabolic mind is the fountain which overflows (E 36).

Thus while the "diabolical sense" of the Bible is a rehabilitation of the primary document of literate priestcraft, something the world shall have as a treat "if they behave well," the Bible of Hell is something new, a grim necessity which the world shall have "whether they will or no." For while Blake believes the Biblical text can be redeemed, he never loses his Paineite conviction that the book is a product of priestly manipulation, and therefore an eternal threat to the bardic perspective. The corruptions of Priesthood are woven into the text itself. This is apparent in *Jerusalem*, for instance, in the scene in which the Divine Lord builds the fallen Albion's "Couch of repose" (E 196). The Couch is "canopied with emblems and written verse" (E 196), one of the rare instances in Blake's myth of a written text appearing in a positive light.[1] The texts written on the Couch are works of "Spiritual Verse" (that is, inspired oral verse), and Blake's list of these works encompasses most of the books of the Bible (E 196). Most, but not all: Blake leaves much of the Bible out of the list, notably the Book of Acts and the apostolic letters. Apparently the greater part of the New Testament is not "Spiritual Verse." The nature of these missing texts is explained in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, where Paul, author or subject of most of the texts, is mythologized as a portion of the Covering Cherub, the

---

[1] Significantly, this ornamental text is accompanied by "emblems," suggesting that when text is written by the Divine Lord, it takes the form of the illuminated page. See later sections of this chapter.

Spectre of Albion who inhabits "the Newtonian Voids between the Substances of Creation" (E 138; see also 120). Paul is one of the seven "Dragon Forms" who embody "Religion hid in War" (E 138, 231); he is the "Church Paul" of feminine deception condemned by Los (E 206). These images express Blake's rejection of Paul's Hellenized interpretation of the oral legends and sayings associated with Jesus' life and death.[1] Paul's materialist understanding of the story of Jesus (for Paul, Jesus' resurrection is a historical and not a poetic fact) becomes the foundation of orthodox Christianity in all succeeding ages. Thus the integration of the Pauline materials into the Jewish-Christian canon is one of the great triumphs of ancient priestcraft, establishing within the Bible an irremovable set of Newtonian Rules of Interpretation that recontextualize the Spiritual Verse of the other books in the philosophical terms of classical antiquity. These materials are the foundation upon which Constantine, Charlemagne, and Luther would build the last of the Twenty-Seven Churches, "monstrous dishumanizd terrors Synagogues of Satan" (E 137). The Biblical text considered as a whole is therefore an amalgam of inspiration and priestcraft, and can only be fully redeemed when these parts are clearly identified in the fresh terms of a new inspiration. The Bible in its diabolic sense tells many stories, but it cannot tell the story of its own absorption by the material, angelic Bible. Thus the need for a Bible of Hell, a new expression of the exuberant oral cosmos of the ancient bards and prophets.

---

[1] Blake's approving quotations from Paul's letters (e.g. E 30, 300) seem to belie the negative portrayal of the apostle in the prophetic books. However, we should remember that Blake saw the Bible not as an authoritative text, but as "a book of Examples" (E 618) to be interpreted by spiritual inspiration. That he quoted a text therefore does not imply that he accepted the orthodox reading. As the more literate- and literal-minded John Linnell complained, Blake was guilty of "the most lax interpretations of Scripture" (qtd. in Ackroyd 325). That is to say, he felt free to quote Paul (or any part of the Bible) as he wished, interpreting any priestly distortions not in the "natural sense" in which they may have been intended, but in a "Spiritual Sense," as he told Crabb Robinson (qtd. in Gilchrist 341).

All things considered, however, it seems likely that Blake saw Paul (who did, after all, write that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God" [1 Cor. 2:14]) as a Paine-like figure, bound by priestcraft, but still profoundly inspired in many ways. Thus Blake reports to Butts in 1803 that he has completed a picture "of St. Paul Preaching" (E 729), and Gilchrist recounts an anecdote stating that upon encountering the apostle in visionary form on a London street, Blake removed his hat and bowed deeply (Gilchrist 319).

The Bard Buys a Printing Press

The arrival of this new Bible marks the point at which Blake's model of history intersects with the moment of his own poetic composition, the point at which his mythological vision of the redemption of the literate word is realized in the context of Romantic-era print culture. Appropriately enough, the means by which this redemption would be attempted came to him in the form of an oral revelation, in this instance from his dead brother Robert, who gave him detailed instruction in the techniques of illuminated printing (Ackroyd 111). Certain details of this technique remain controversial,[1] but the general outlines are well-understood. Briefly, Blake bought his own printing press, and used a variety of techniques of copperplate etching (most notably a form of relief etching) to produce colour prints that he and his wife later worked over by hand with brush and pen.[2] The resulting illustrated books seem to embody in an obvious way the energy of the oral cosmos, and there may seem little reason to question Blake's choice of the illuminated book as the vehicle of his spiritual dictation. The choice is not as obvious as it might seem, however. Blake's primitivist theories of composition and reception conceptualize literate media as supplements to oral revelation. From the point of view of these theories, the written word is merely a copying and distribution mechanism, of no great significance when properly interpreted with oral guidance despite its priestly and materialist nature. If this is the case, one might legitimately wonder why Blake did not use the cheapest and most efficient copying mechanisms available, and simply print his revelations conventionally. After all, Paine (in his better moments) was another Inspired Man, and he had "overthrow[n] all the armies of Europe with a small pamphlet" (E 617). Paine had not needed anything as elaborate as the illuminated book to work his "miracle" (E 617). The defiant, apocalyptic tone of Blake's threat to unleash a Bible of Hell upon an unwilling world suggests that he dreamed his own inspired writings might have similarly dramatic effects. If the orally composed word can be meaningfully preserved in a literate text, as the dictation model postulates, and if literacy can be redeemed by reabsorption into a primitivist cosmology, as the Urizen myth suggests, it is difficult to see why cheap print was not Blake's ideal weapon against the priestly power structure. Certainly the cultural climate would have encouraged him in this respect; Paine's claim that the press "gives to man a sort of divine attribute" of "mental omnipresence" reflects a widespread contemporary feeling that the printing press had become the most powerful force in society, surpassing even Church and State. Certainly this was the view (or at least the hope) of the radical fringe to which Blake belonged in the years of his first illuminated printings. The remarks in the November 1788 issue of the *Analytical Review* are typical in this respect. The printed word, "by enlightening the understanding, and uniting the sentiments and views of men and of nations, forms a concert of wills, and a concurrence of action too powerful for the armies of tyrants," the

---

[1] See Essick and Viscomi, "An Inquiry Into William Blake's Method of Color Printing" in *Blake Quarterly*, Winter 2002, 74-102.

[2] Details of the process may be found in the two most authoritative works on the subject, Robert Essick's *William Blake: Printmaker* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1980), and Joseph Viscomi's *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993).

Review exults (*Analytical Review* 2.3, Nov. 1788, 324-5). Thirty years and two decades of Pittite censorship later, Thomas Wooler, editor of the extreme radical journal *The Black Dwarf*, would mock the government's stamp taxes by proclaiming that "the *art of printing* from its *nature* bids *defiance* to tyranny" (Wooler 854). Perhaps the most dramatic example of radical enthusiasm for the press may be found in the influential radical pamphlet of 1819, *The Political House that Jack Built*. In this pamphlet, written by William Hone and illustrated by George Cruikshank, the printing press is portrayed as a religious icon, an unstoppable weapon of righteousness. After caricatured illustrations of various figures of established authority, the pamphlet displays a bold, undistorted image of a printing press above the lines "This is THE THING, that in spite of new Acts, / And attempts to restrain it by Soldiers or Tax / Will *poison* the Vermin, / That plunder the Wealth, / That lay in the House, / That Jack built" (qtd. in Wood 241). With almost superstitious awe, Hone avoids writing the name of "THE THING," as if, like God, it were too powerful to be invoked directly. Even conservatives and anti-Jacobins agreed with this assessment of the power of the press. A fairly representative conservative view is that of Blake's almost-patron, the Rev. Dr. Trusler. In 1798, Trusler published "An Essay on Literary Property," blaming the French Revolution on the spread of literacy among the poor. To prevent a similar mutiny in England, he argued, the poor should be denied literacy education by government order, and taxes should be implemented to price books and pamphlets beyond the means of those who acquire such education on their own ("An Essay" 100). In these circumstances, it is not surprising to find Blake predicting (in the Preface to *Milton*) the imminent dawning of a "New Age" when "all will be set right: & those Grand Works of the more ancient and consciously &

professedly Inspired Men, will hold their proper rank" (E 95). It seems that he even experimented with the conventional printing of his mythic poetry in "The French Revolution." But for unknown reasons, this poem was aborted and never published. Blake elected instead to publish his Bible of Hell in a form that bore little resemblance to conventional printed text.

Over the past century and a half, critics have suggested many reasons why he might have done this, and the variety of their views suggests the complexity of the question. While modern critics have tended to focus on the ways the illuminated books diverge from the mainstream of print culture in the Romantic era, the earliest critics of Blake instead emphasized the degree to which the illuminated books *participated* in conventional print culture, and seem to have considered them an eccentric venture in commercial book illustration. The illuminated plates were merely a colourful setting for poems which might have more usefully been printed conventionally. Swinburne, for instance, argued that the poems were best appreciated in the "lovely and luminous setting" of the illustrations (qtd. in Viscomi 369), but added that "this decorative work . . . is mere husk and shell" (369). Gilchrist, too, saw the pictures primarily as conventional illustrations, although he took a stronger stand for the integrity of the illuminated page. The poems and accompanying designs form "warp and woof in one texture," he writes, and although the poetry might be easily divorced from its illustrated context, to actually remove it would be "like pulling up a daisy by the roots from the greensward out of which it springs" (Gilchrist 61). For Gilchrist, the plates were an organic whole, but the theoretical meaning of this whole was reducible to the aesthetic enhancement of the written text. For the next several decades, this view prevailed, and Blake's illuminations were understood as a form of conventional illustrated book, although of a sort prohibitively expensive to reproduce. This approach to Blake is evident in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century corrected editions of the poetry, such as those of Swinburne, Rossetti, and Yeats. These editions are unabashed attempts to gloss over the idiosyncratic features of the illuminated book and assimilate the poetry into the established paradigm of published poetry, to straighten Blake's crooked roads of genius with standardized grammar, punctuation, and even poetic diction. The drive to solidify the Blakean text in the terms of established print culture reaches its zenith in the scholarly (and corrected) Keynes edition of the complete works. In Keynes, the illuminated book serves as the raw material from which a conventional printed text might be extracted and canonized.[1]

In the wake of the post-McLuhan boom of interest in media studies (and the increasing availability of high-quality reproductions) this trend has reversed, and the illuminated plate itself has become the primary focus of Blake scholarship. Improved understanding of Blake's actual engraving and printing processes has led to a new appreciation of "how profoundly Blake's theories of art and imagination are grounded in graphic execution," as Joseph Viscomi states (Viscomi xxv). Indeed, the prevailing modern view is that Blake's poetry is ultimately *inextricable* from its illuminated context, and that the illuminated book, packed with visual meaning and eccentric, unconventional language, is a complete *rejection* of conventional book culture and all it represents. This point of view is most energetically expressed by the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group in their essay "What Type of Blake?" Even Erdman's widely approved print edition of

---

[1] While Keynes has been criticized for his decision to alter Blake's illuminated text in the direction of print legibility (notably by the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group in their essay "What Type of Blake?"), it is worth remembering that he did believe in the integrity of the illuminated plate, and was the editor (for example) of a low-cost colour reproduction of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975).

Blake, the Group argues, is a product of the conception-execution division that characterizes older, corrected, editions. Although the Erdman edition aims to provide "a text as close as possible to Blake's own" (Erdman, "Textual Notes" 786), the Study Group argues that *any* attempt to render the poetry in some descendant of movable type represents a denial of the message of Blake's chosen medium. "[A] significant part of the *complete* poetry is a visual-verbal semiotic in which form and meaning cannot be separated from material substance or the adequate representation of the materiality of substance," they contend (Santa Cruz 315-16). Blake's poetry, they claim, is welded to its graphical and graphological presentation. To study Blake is to study the plates. To study even the meticulous printed edition of Erdman is to study a typographical distortion.

Adherents of this view have advanced a number of theories of the illuminated book that purport to explain why Blake might have wanted to avoid making use of the processes of conventional print. One of the most influential might be called the synaesthesia theory, which states that Blake intended the books to be instruments by which the reader's established patterns of sensory perception might be disrupted. This theory has been advocated in abbreviated form by Northrop Frye, and in extended form, by Marshall McLuhan. For Frye, this combination of painting and poetry, or visual and oral art, is part of Blake's more general drive to unify wherever he finds artificial division and fragmentation. McLuhan goes much farther, arguing that the illuminated page is a multimedia counterblast against the "fragmented, lineal awareness, such as was produced and greatly exaggerated by Gutenberg technology" (McLuhan, *Gutenberg* 315). The plates are an attempt to revive in the reader/viewer the primal "tactility" of the senses, the unity they possessed before they were divided by media, each of which intensifies the experience of a particular sense by "embedding" that sense in material technologies that stimulate it exclusively (314). By combining the tactile medium of painting with the intensely visual medium of print, Blake tries to tip the balance of the reader/viewer's "sense ratio" away from the pure visualness of print towards the pre-Gutenberg state of "synaesthesia," or integrated, balanced sensory experience (314-15). Robert Essick's theory of the plates owes something to McLuhan, for he, too, points to "the synaesthetic nature" of Blake's approach to the senses (Essick, *Language* 182). For Essick, however, the essence of the illuminated book is its defiance of the conception-execution division. The process of relief etching allows Blake to join written composition (which Essick sees in terms of handwriting, not orality) to printing, the final mode of execution, within "a seamless web of production" (167).

Another important stream of critical thought postulates that the illuminated book is more specifically a theoretical challenge to the *commercial* aspects of late eighteenth-century print culture. The anti-commercial nature of illuminated printing has been particularly emphasized by Stephen Leo Carr and Morris Eaves. Carr has suggested that the individual variations in printings (some deliberate, some an artifact of the process) constitute a rebellion against "the logic of mechanization" exemplified in commercial typographic printing (Carr 182). The illuminated page is "an artistic practice significantly in opposition to historically dominant modes of artistic production," says Carr (183). In his influential essay "Blake and the Artistic Machine," Eaves argues that these dominant modes are defined by the principle of *mechanism*, the reduction of art to a mechanical system amenable to the needs of mass-market production and distribution (Eaves, "Machine" 175). Viewed in this context, printing is the linguistic equivalent of the systematized art factories of Rubens and Rembrandt. The illuminated book, on the other hand, is a categorical rejection of key elements of this paradigm, avoiding both the reproductive predictability of conventional printing and the tonal fuzziness of the popular dot-and-lozenge and mezzotint styles of engraving. Building on these arguments (especially that of Eaves), the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group has concluded that rejection of commercial print culture is the defining theoretical principle of the illuminated text, so much so that any representation of Blake's poetry in conventional print (including Erdman's efforts to preserve the style of the engraved text) represents "a recuperation of Blake's text by the very forces it sought to oppose" (Santa Cruz 32). This influential theory of illuminated printing has been questioned, however, by Joseph Viscomi. "Blake appears to have known that the enormous popularity of hand-colored prints and facsimiles of drawings had created a market for prints like his," says Viscomi (Viscomi xxv). Certainly Blake's unabashed sales pitch in the 1793 prospectus "To the Public" seems to justify Viscomi's caution. "If a method of Printing which combines the Painter and the Poet is a phenomenon worthy of public attention, provided that it exceeds in elegance all former methods, the Author is sure of his reward," says Blake (E 692). Gilchrist had earlier emphasized the marketability of the illuminated books, claiming that Blake had intended to make their sale his primary means of support (Gilchrist 69), but Viscomi has calculated that the profit margin on the laboriously produced books was too low for Blake to entertain hopes this high (Viscomi 251). The books were clearly intended as a commercial venture, but this cannot have been their primary purpose. Blake's 1818 letter to Dawson Turner, which includes his price list for a number of the books, seems to support Viscomi's case. In this letter, Blake complains that the books are "unprofitable enough to me though Expensive to the Buyer" (E 771). "I have never been able to produce a Sufficient number for a general Sale by a regular Publisher," he adds (E 771). This is hardly a defiant rejection of commercial print culture. On the other hand, Blake's determination to continue producing the "unprofitable" books over a period of thirty years suggests that Viscomi is right to accept his claim that "the chief thing Intended" in producing the books was to gain "a great reputation as an artist" (E 771), presumably through the medium of Commerce. Once again, Blake's ambivalence towards the marketplace is best understood in the terms proposed by Morris Eaves in *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy*. As we saw in the preceding chapter, Eaves believes it is a mistake to regard Blake as either defiantly anti-commercial or as an uncritical participant in the commercial literary culture of his age. The paradoxical status of the illuminated books is a reflection of Blake's love-hate relationship with the art-buying public, a manifestation of his unique adaptation of the English-school program of artistic reform.

Eaves' argument that Blake wanted to cleanse the commercial art world of false tastes adapted to the values of mass production is not only consistent with the themes of fall and redemption that structure his philosophy, it also allows us to examine illuminated printing in a new set of terms. If we consider, for instance, that in Blake's primitivist philosophy "redemption" means the recuperation of priestly (i.e. literate, materialistic) institutions and structures of thought by their bardic-prophetic (i.e. oral, humanized) counterparts, the illuminated book must represent the *primitivization* of commercial print. This reconceptualization of the illuminated book makes it possible for us to understand its unique characteristics as manifestations of a primitivist aesthetic and allows us to enlarge our understanding of Blake's antagonism towards the culture of commercial print by contextualizing it in the terms of his historical theory. Indeed, the totality of the psychological effects (lineal awareness, the division of conception and execution, the creation of lowbrow tastes suited to cheap, mechanized production) attributed to commercial print by modern critics may be summed up in a single idea that extends Blake's primitivist theory of literacy into the age of mechanized printing.

The Idea of Print Fixity

"I have had occasion to observe, sometimes with vexation, and sometimes with merriment, the different temper with which the same man reads a printed and manuscript performance," Samuel Johnson writes in *Rambler #23* (qtd. in Kernan 164). As one of the first major English writers to live in a society of mass literacy, and a lifelong student of the psychology of reading and writing, Johnson had noticed that the printed word was something new under the sun. People responded to it in a new way; the new medium had created a new kind of reader. In fact, Johnson observed that the print reader is a much more *docile* creature than the reader of a handwritten text. "When a book is once in the hands of the public," he writes, "it is considered permanent and unalterable . . . but if the same man be called to consider the merit of a production yet unpublished, he brings an imagination heated with objections" (164). Johnson had discovered that a printed text is authoritative in a way that a manuscript is not. The print reader tends not to challenge the text, but rather "accommodates his mind to the author's design" and is "often contented without pleasure, and pleased without perfection" (164). On the other hand, when faced with an unpublished manuscript, the reader feels free (even called upon) to change it. The reader feels powerful in relation to such a text, Johnson notes, and "considers himself obliged to shew, by some proof of his abilities, that he is not consulted to no purpose" (164).

Johnson's observations seem to confirm the arguments of modern theorists that "it was print, not writing, that effectively reified the word" (Ong, *Orality* 119). Alvin Kernan has called this phenomenon "print fixity," or "print's remarkable ability to confer authoritative being and firm truth on its texts" (Kernan 165). Indeed, Johnson's alternately passive and querulous readers seem to substantiate McLuhan's assertion that "[t]he difference between the man of print and the man of scribal culture is nearly as great as that between the non-literate and the literate" (McLuhan, *Gutenberg* 113). Considered in the terms of Blake's theory of literacy, the technology of printing thus represents an intensification of the materializing, solidifying principle of literate Priesthood. If the manuscript books of the primeval priests transform oral tales into authoritative material symbols, the invention of printing clearly exacerbates this process, tightening the priestly grip on the human imagination, rendering the reader even more passive to the authority of the text (and implicitly, to the materialist philosophy the text embodies).

Johnson's limited speculations as to the nature of print fixity suggest connections between modern critics' anti-commercialist readings of the illuminated book and Blake's primitivist theory that the literate word is the materialization of the Urizenic spirit. The printed word appears more authoritative, hints Johnson, because it speaks of its origins in a commercial process of production and distribution. The word becomes "permanent and unalterable" in the reader's mind only when published and placed "in the hands of the public." Although Johnson does not elaborate, these remarks echo Ong's contention that print "embedded the word deeply in the manufacturing process" (Ong, *Orality* 118), a process that confers authority on its products by dissociating them from their human origins, making them seem autonomous and mechanically precise. The printed word, arranged in impossibly neat rows with perfectly regular margins, "impresses with its tidiness and inevitability," says Ong (122). "This is an insistent world of cold, non-human facts," he adds (122). Handwriting contributes to a certain quality of fixity, in that the words are statically arranged in visual, rather than aural, space, but tiny irregularities and scribal touches are constant reminders of the text's origin in a human hand and brain. Even manuscript books written by hired scribes in standardized scripts are ornamented with idiosyncratic flourishes, illustrations, or unauthorized scribal additions (Allen 99-100). One might infer that the handwritten word is too *organic* to acquire an aura of impersonal authority. The printed word, on the other hand, is the product of mechanism, of a language-mill that turns the elements of speech into intermeasurable units arranged in systematic patterns. The technology of movable type breaks the organic wholeness of the oral word into mechanical segments suited to the repetitive, impersonal purposes of commerce.

Considered in this light, the printed text combines the inherent priestliness of literacy with the dehumanizing, abstracting aspects of mechanized commerce. The spirit of intermeasurability and the obliteration of individuality deeply infect the printing process. Like the art-factories of the Counter Arts conspiracy, the printed text is the product of an assembly line, passing through many hands (author, editor, compositor) before reaching its readership. The author's original conception is divided from its ultimate execution by a pragmatic division of labour. Not only does this impose "Ignorant journeymen" between the artist and the public (E 573), it impresses the reader with a sense that the printed text has been pre-approved by a kind of commercial committee whose possession of capital and technology makes them *de facto* cultural gatekeepers. Paradoxically, even the errors made by this committee can contribute to the fixity of the text. "The printed text is supposed to represent the words of an author in definitive or 'final' form," notes Ong (Ong, *Orality* 132), and even the inclusion of a list of errata suggests that the text has been carefully checked before distribution, and so "encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion" (132).

Johnson's print reader is also certainly aware that his pre-approved text, replicated in hundreds or thousands of copies, is practically immortal and immutable by the time it reaches his hand. Only a huge enterprise of organized censorship, or recall and reprinting, could now destroy or alter it. Challenging this text *as text* would be pointless. The mechanical fecundity of the press (its most valuable and powerful quality) is thus a powerful factor in creating print fixity. What was once an ephemeral flow of sound, or a fragile page of handwritten scribbles, acquires a kind of transcendence by virtue of material indestructibility. Now dispersed around the country (or the world), the text is dissociated from any particular place or person; it becomes a divided entity, a pure abstract conception cut off from its thousands of material executions.

The more deeply we consider the profound materiality and mechanistic dehumanization of the commercially printed word, the more we understand the difficulties of absorbing it into a primitivist philosophy whose fundamental principles are energetic spontaneity and omnipresent Human Form. Print is the unholy offspring of priestly literacy and the "Fiends of Commerce," an improved weapon of Urizenic oppression that solidifies the word beyond the dreams of the ancient scribal priests. The effects of this medium were both real and powerful, at least in the opinion of Johnson, who approved of them wholeheartedly. As we have seen, Johnson believed that print creates a new kind of passive reader who accepts the text as an unalterable static abstraction, and who therefore "accommodates his mind to the author's design" like a page accepting the imprint of the press. For the misanthropic Johnson, this kind of fixity is a blessing, circumventing as it does the critical pretensions of the average reader, who "stores his memory with Taste and Grace, Purity and Delicacy, Manners and Unities" and is all-too-easily encouraged to apply these ideas without any genuine understanding or sensitivity (164). Johnson even shared the conviction of Blake and Paine that this fixity was largely an illusion, or in the terms of Augustan criticism, a form of irrationality. His experiences in dictionary-making had taught him the futility of attempting to arrest the "boundless chaos of living speech" in the fixed format of a printed book (qtd. in Kernan 19). But if print fixity was an illusion, Johnson considered it a beneficial illusion, satisfying not only for the power it grants to authors, but also for its ultimately conservative nature, its tendency to stabilize the flux of language and reinforce faith in the social and commercial institutions associated with literacy.[1]

---

[1] Mark Twain would later give Human Form to Johnson's ideal reader in *Huckleberry Finn*'s Tom Sawyer. After proposing that his robber band bring their prisoners back to the cave to be "ransomed to death," Tom is questioned by a skeptical Ben Rogers, who wonders, "Why can't a body take a club and ransom them as soon as they get here?" Tom Sawyer's response is a Johnsonian fantasy: "Because it ain't in the books so – that's why. . . . Don't you reckon that the people that made the books knows what's the correct thing to do? Do you reckon *you* can learn them anything? Not by a good deal. No sir, we'll just go on and ransom them

As the combined psychological effect of print's material and commercial (that is, mechanical and dehumanized) nature, print fixity thus presents a real challenge to the dictation model of poetic composition. The model seems to suggest that there is no antagonism between the spontaneous, spiritual energy of oral inspiration and the repetitive, mechanistic materialism of writing and print because all genuine creative and receptive functions are located in the oral phases of composition and reading. But the idea of print fixity suggests that the reproductive process might bring powerful meanings of its own to the final product. If print loudly proclaims its own authority and self-sufficiency, it denies (much more than mere handwriting does) its nature as a mere image, a physical copy of a spiritual, oral reality. Far from liberating the reader, the printed publication of oral revelation might instead have a tranquilizing effect, encouraging a subconscious, unquestioning faith in the status quo that both legitimizes and is legitimized by literacy.

Undermining Print Fixity: The Oral Book

Blake thus faced a problem. How could he take advantage of print's reproductive powers without having the socially and philosophically subversive orality of his poetry neutralized by the medium's inherent fixity? Might he not merely end up creating his own material Bible?[1] This was not an issue for Paine, who had no quarrels with

---

in the regular way" (Twain 10). The "regular" way (*regulated* way, Johnson might say), is the way it is "in the books."

[1] Indeed, some critics contend that the mass production of conventionally printed editions of Blake has had precisely this effect, stripping his poetry of much of its subversive quality and reinforcing the political

commerce, and no concern that the material fixity of his own printed works might bolster a philosophy of materialism. But Blake's goals were more ~~far~~-reaching, and his problems more complex. The answer revealed to him by spiritual dictate was to create a book that made use of the reproductive power of print, but which undermined the various elements of print fixity as much as possible in its design and manner of production. As a new bard of the age of print, Blake would appropriate the instruments of priestly-commercial culture and subordinate them to the dictates of oral revelation, reversing the tactics of the primeval priests. The result would be a new kind of printed book whose guiding aesthetic would be the energetic fluctuation and organicism of primitive orality. As the material Bible is the priestly appropriation of the oral tales of the ancient bards, the illuminated book (from the priestly perspective, the Bible of Hell) is the bardic appropriation of the printed book.

This reading of the illuminated book allows us organize a number of streams of critical thought under the comprehensive rubric of primitivism. The illuminated book is commercial, as Viscomi and the early critics insist, but represents a *redeemed* (not *rejected*) Commerce, the transformation of Urizen into his post-apocalyptic form. The dark, wintry father of "Trades and Commerce" (E 360) becomes "bright, beaming Urizen" in the colourful illuminated page (E 256). From this perspective, the dissolution of the conception-execution division in Essick's "seamless web of production" is the conversion of printing into an image of oral spontaneity. The priestly dualism of abstract conception and material execution is destroyed in a new vision of printing as a prolonged outpouring of spiritual energy. This conversion is portrayed in *The Marriage of Heaven*

---

tyranny of the printed page. See, for example, the Santa Cruz Study Group's "What Type of Blake?" and Julia Wright"s "Medium, Message, and Line in Blake's *Laocoon*" (*Mosaic*, June 2000 33:2 101-24).

(not in W.C.)

and Hell in the bardic narrator's vision of Hell's printing house. The space in which printing occurs (that is, the cultural space of print literacy) is opened by Dragons and adorned by Vipers, Blakean symbols of Satanic bestiality and cunning (E 40). These creatures are associated with Urizen throughout the mythological poems (Urizen himself becomes a dragon in *The Four Zoas* [E 381-2]; the creature whose blood stains the rock of Sinai is a poisonous serpent [E 85]). But in the next phases of Infernal printing, the space of the Dragons and Vipers is "caused . . . to be infinite" (E 40) by an Eagle, an animal described as "a portion of Genius" in the Proverbs of Hell (E 37), and the metals of the printing process are melted into "living fluids" by "Lions of flaming fire" symbolizing energy or spiritual wrath (E 40). That is to say, the restricted space of Urizenic printing is transformed into an open, infinite space by the activities of creative Genius, and the hard solidity of the printed word (symbolized here by the hard metal types) is melted into living, fluid form by spontaneous energy. The resulting "living fluids" are "cast into the expanse" (the cultural space of print literacy, now open and limitless) where they are received by Men in the form of books (E 40).

The transformation of the hard, rigid types of commercial printing into the "living fluids" of the Infernal book confirms that the aesthetic of the illuminated plate is defined by the vitality and fluidity of oral language. If the conventionally printed book speaks loudly of its origins in the materialistic dreams of Priesthood and the mechanical mills of Commerce, the illuminated book proclaims its origin in the anthropomorphic oral cosmos of a revived bardic culture. The "tactility" and "synaesthesia" McLuhan finds in the books reflect his experience of Blake's primitivist sensibility, for the colourful painted plates, alive with graphical activity, can be seen as an attempt to evoke as much as possible the living context of oral speech within the material matrix of print. Conventional books, dull and grey, are the substance of the "Rolling volumes of grey mist" that enfold England when Urizen unclasps his brazen book in *Europe* (E 64). The brightly coloured pages of the illuminated book, on the other hand, fulfill the *Europe* fairy's promise to "write a book on leaves of flowers" by spiritual dictation (E 59). Unlike the printed word, which is characteristically experienced in a kind of solipsistic reverie, orality is always situational, concrete, part of a sensorily rich moment of integrated sound, sight and touch. As Ong explains, the oral word is "close to the human lifeworld" in a way the literate word is not (Ong, *Orality* 43). The bright colours and strong outlines of the illuminated page express the vividness of the oral moment, stimulating the reader's sight and imagination, hindering him from experiencing the text in a Johnsonian state of passive acceptance. McLuhan's observation that "myth is the mode of simultaneous awareness of a complex group of causes and effects" suggests a further dimension to the illuminated plate's mimesis of oral experience, for the statement is equally applicable to the medium in which Blake expresses his myth (McLuhan, *Gutenberg* 315). As the early oral myths wove philosophy, morality and narrative into a unified performative experience, the illuminated page weaves visual and verbal elements into an integrated textual and graphical experience. McLuhan adds that "[i]n an age of fragmented, lineal awareness [in Blake's terms, Urizenic or priestly awareness], such as produced and was in turn greatly exaggerated by Gutenberg technology, mythological vision remains quite opaque" (315). But when considered in the context of Blake's assertion that "what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act" (E 702), this beautiful opacity is actually incentive for the reader to relinquish the philosophies and patterns of conventional literacy, to embrace the bardic perspective and redeem the printed page in appreciation of Blake's revisioning of its possibilities. In terms of the illuminated page, this opacity is effected by Blake's defiance of the conventions that structure the reader's experience of the printed text. The interweaving of text and painting, the abandonment of conventional punctuation and spelling, the strange and often bewildering images that accompany the text, all make intense demands on the reader's attention and imagination. In this respect, they are a powerful antidote to print fixity, whose effect according to Johnson is to put the critical faculties to sleep. Every reader of Blake knows how difficult it is to skim an illuminated page quickly, to read it uncritically and automatically, for it constantly defies a print reader's expectations and demands that the reader *act*, gauging the meaning of images, the relation of images to text, the meanings of sentences whose punctuation is unclear or even defiantly wrong.

The world portrayed in the images is, of course, the bardic cosmos of living Human Form, and the humanizing drive of primitivism informs the plates even in their mode of production. This is evident, for instance, in the variations among the editions. This has been treated in the preceding chapter as a manifestation of an oral model of textuality, but as was noted earlier in this chapter, many critics have pointed out that it also signifies a rejection of mechanistic modes of production. Approaching the question from the perspective of Blake's primitivism, we see that illuminated printing replaces mechanism with a *humanized* repetition in which each iteration, each performance of the text, bears the imprint of a guiding intelligence which is active and involved in each stage of production. As Carr has observed, "Variation is the necessary condition of a work of illuminated printing" (Carr 185). Variation may be introduced in the matter of plate order, as we have seen, but is also an inevitable product of Blake's colour printing process, for erosion of the copperplate and the impossibility of replicating ink quantity and paper placement with precision through multiple editions creates endless possibilities for both deliberate and accidental variation. Essick has made the case that production accidents are an important theoretical component of the books, that Blake found inspiration in "allow[ing] the medium to express its own tendencies" (Essick, "Body" 216). More significantly, it seems to me, Blake's practice of finishing his colour-printed plates by hand enabled him to introduce dramatic variations that truly reflected changes in his artistic vision. It should be noted that Joseph Viscomi has advocated caution in drawing "ideological" conclusions from the facts of Blake's production process (Viscomi 372). After careful experiments in replicating Blake's printing process, Viscomi concludes that the books were produced in editions, not individual copies, and that "each copy of an illuminated book was not meant as a unique version" (374). Indeed, an acid-etched copper plate is in some ways *more* fixed than movable type, adds Viscomi, and thus represents "a decisive commitment to fix verbal structures" (373).[1] Viscomi's warnings are well-taken. To argue that every stray fleck of paint constitutes a radical challenge to the Fiends of Commerce seems to manifest an un-Blakean dedication to a rational absolute. Viscomi's emphasis on the Minute Particulars of illuminated printing forces us to remember Blake's own conviction that no system is completely self-contained, that the Urizenic dream of a totalizing imaginative structure is a dangerous fantasy. This should not, however, prevent us from noticing that Blake's printing process seems to push in the direction of variation, nor that it embraces human presence and the fluid ephemerality of orality as guiding principles if not as absolute standards by which every element of the books must be measured.

---

[1] Viscomi also agrees with Paul Mann's argument that Blake intended to publish *The Four Zoas* as an engraved letterpress text framed with designs, in the manner of Young's *Night Thoughts* (Viscomi 316). While the present study clearly leans towards the view that illuminated printing has theoretical significance (in terms of primitivist thought), I do not mean to suggest that Blake saw the books as a *rejection* of conventional printing. In fact, I agree with Viscomi that this argument is typically "overstated" (317). I suggest instead that the illuminated book is a *redemption* of commercial print in primitivist terms – a claim that allows for the possibility that Blake may have attempted other, less extreme ways of effecting this redemption, such as a more conventional text-image integration in the manner of *Night Thoughts*, or even spiritually dictated myth printed with movable type ("The French Revolution"). It is worth noting, however, that Blake abandoned both of these projects in favour of the illuminated book.

These principles are visibly present, for instance, in the lettering of the illuminated books. The letters are clearly hand-engraved, and have the appearance of unfixed, mutable manuscript despite the fixity of the etched plate that reproduced them. Indeed, in many cases, the letters are quite literally a manuscript overlay, a coloured elaboration of the engraved letters. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is a notable example of this process; at times entire sentences are coloured in ways that separate them from nearby text or lend emphasis to particular passages. The words "Printing-house" on Plate 15 of one edition are a bold blue, for example, standing out from the surrounding yellow as if drawing attention to the explication of Infernal printing that follows. The manuscript style varies throughout Blake's work, but in general, his letters are organic variations of various conventional engraving scripts. The letters of *Songs of Innocence*, for instance, mimic the large, upright Roman type of children's books, but have soft, exaggerated serifs that sometimes blossom into sprays of greenery or even tiny Human Forms (as on the title page). Even when the content of the poetry is more severe, the letters retain their organic vitality, often seeming to grow out of control, winding around and through the illustrations, or even becoming tiny illustrations themselves. This is the expansion and vitalization of the Dragon-space of printing by the Eagles and Lions of Genius and Energy. The printed word has been appropriated and redeemed by a bardic perspective in which all things are alive and "every particle of dust breathes forth its joy" (E 60).

Certain characteristics of the illuminated books that appear strange or even ill-chosen to the print reader may be accounted for as manifestations of the bardic perspective. Blake's portrayal of animals, for instance, has been a matter of some comment. Michael Ferber's memorable remark in the online magazine *Academe* is not atypical. "I could do a better 'tyger' myself than the stunned ill-proportioned tomcat Blake squeezed into the bottom of the plate bearing his most famous poem," he states (Ferber). But the essential thing about Blake's animals is that they are always *anthropomorphized*. This can certainly lend them a ludicrous appearance when we look with the eye of materialist philosophy. But setting aside the gentleness of Blake's tiger (possibly satirical, as Ferber acknowledges), the face is "ill-proportioned" because it is rounded and flattened to resemble a *human* face, and the same is true of all Blake's animals and animal-like monsters. The primitivistic tendency of Blake's drawing and painting considered as a whole has been well-described by Robert Essick, who argues that it is best understood as an attempt to return to early Renaissance styles that predated the art-factory styles of his own age. "Like Basire's antiquarian manner," says Essick, "[Blake's style] combines determinate outlines with bold linear patterns that give a sense of depth and variety of textures to the neglect of subtle tonal transitions favored by early nineteenth-century connoisseurs" (Essick, *Printmaker* 190). The firm, determinate outline is of course the visual expression of Energy, the graphic equivalent of the bold, appropriate language of the true Orator. As Blake explains in the marginalia to Reynolds' *Discourses*, this style of drawing is a form of spiritual dictation: "The Man who asserts that there is no Such Thing as Softness in Art & that every thing in Art is Definite & Determinate has not been told this by Practise but by Inspiration and Vision" (E 646). Blake's drawing style mimics the nature of the spiritual world itself, "because Vision is Determinate & Perfect" (E 646). His knowledge of these principles comes from "Con or Innate Science" (E 646), or as the marginalia to Watson call it, the oral "voice of God" (E 613).

According to the principles of the dictation model, the spiritual world of orality that instructs the bardic artist in the elements of both poetic and painterly style and guides him in his creation of "a method of Printing which combines the Painter and the Poet" is the same spiritual world that must guide the reader in interpreting the product of this process (E 692). Indeed, Blake seems to fully expect his reader to "Enter into these Images in his Imagination approaching them on the Fiery Chariot of Contemplative Thought," to accept the anthropomorphic Original Philosophy and "make a Friend and Companion of one of these Images of wonder which always intreats him to leave mortal things" (E 560). As always, Blake is speaking literally. When a reader comes to see one of Blake's paintings or poems (or combined painting-poems) as a Human Form, a "Friend and Companion," he enters into the bardic perspective embodied in these works of art and ceases to live in the materialistic cosmos of Priesthood, thereby "aris[ing] from his Grave" (E 560). In the terms of Blake's historical model, that reader lives out in his own psyche the end of history, the defeat of Priesthood, the redemption of Urizen and all his institutions. This chapter has attempted to demonstrate that the illuminated book embodies this moment as the concrete manifestation of the bardic perspective's return to ascendancy. In the illuminated book, the anthropomorphic oral cosmos absorbs and redeems the materializing media that worked its overthrow, undermining the fixity of the printed word and co-opting the mechanisms of mass reproduction for the dissemination of inspired oral energy. With these arguments in mind, the next chapter will examine the historical and psychological processes that Blake saw as necessary for the bardic perspective's return to pre-eminence and suggest ways a primitivist reading might enrich our understanding of some crucial aspects of Blake's mythos.

Chapter V

Regenerate Los:

Orality's Fall and the Rebirth of Prophecy

This chapter considers the theoretical basis of Blake's prophetic vocation as expressed in his myths of the fall and redemption of orality. I begin by considering a problem raised by Blake's historical model: what happened to orality after the victory of the literate priests? The chapter attempts to answer this question by considering Blake's opinion of two contemporaries who might seem notable for their commitment to orality, the orator Edmund Burke and the poet William Wordsworth. The orality associated with these figures, it appears, is a *fallen* orality, working in the service of priestcraft. This discussion leads into an examination of fallen orality as it appears in Blake's myth of the fall of Tharmas, "the Angel of the Tongue" (E 214). Tharmas' degeneration into the "False Tongue" (E 158) leads to the birth of Los, the Eternal Prophet, and I argue that in the character of Los-Urthona, Blake distinguishes between unfallen orality, unfallen orality *within* the fallen world, and fallen orality. The latter is the province of a uniquely Blakean figure, the Fallen Bard, and the chapter next considers the place and meaning of this figure in Blake's poetic and historical models. Final sections of the chapter compare the mythic explication of the Fallen Bard in *Milton* and *The Four Zoas* to show how the idea of *redeemed* orality is key to Blake's self-conception as a poet.

Fate of the Bards

As we saw in the previous chapter, Blake's theory of history is structured by a narrative of fall and redemption, the death and eventual rebirth of the anthropomorphic oral culture of the ancient bards and prophets. The role of literacy in this story is explained in the myths of Urizen, the "primeval Priest" (E 70), whose story allegorizes the historical appropriation of the Human Forms of bardic culture and the conversion of these Forms into the abstract deities of a new culture of rational materialism. This process, we saw, is psychologically facilitated by the materializing, codifying technologies of writing and printing.

But there is another important side to this story. If the illuminated book represents the recuperation of literacy by primitive bardic orality, Blake's historical model must postulate that such orality is possible even after the fall of the ancient bards. At first glance, this point might seem rather obviously demonstrated in the survival of speech, song and poetry throughout the "Six Thousand Years" of priestly rule (E 117). As we saw in preceding chapters, however, a primary tenet of eighteenth-century primitivist theory was that historical progress (and in particular, the invention and spread of literacy) had rendered orality less passionate, and therefore less aesthetically powerful, than it had been in primitive ages. In the eyes of many theorists, this meant that the great poetic achievements of the ancient bards and prophets could never be repeated. This is the view of Blackwell, for example, who, as it happens, is not entirely unhappy that orality has declined, and poetry with it. "[A] People's Felicity clips the Wings of their Verse," he wryly observes, arguing that poetry's decline is the price of freedom from the continual warfare that dominates the world of the Homeric primitive (Blackwell 28). "[T]ho' the Pleasures arising from the sublimer kinds of Writing, may make us regret the Silence of the Muses," he writes to his patron, "yet I am persuaded your Lordship will join in the Wish, *That we may never be the proper subject of an* Heroic Poem" (28). The fate of later ages, then, is to enjoy the works of the ancients without being able to reproduce them, (and without really *wanting* to be able to reproduce them). Other primitivists of a reforming temperament disagreed with Blackwell's evaluation of the possibilities of post-primitive orality, but as we have seen, the Lockean sympathies of theorists like Thomas Sheridan and John Brown led them to advocate the restoration of a primitive orality that was primitive in name only, a "spontaneous" orality carefully regulated by rationality and state-sponsored institutions. This is a *politicized* primitivism expressly intended to exclude the "wild orators" of Methodism and the energetic vulgarity of popular song (Sheridan 128).

Blake, on the other hand, accepts the universalist implications of primitivism and grants a degree of true inspiration to everyone from the ancient Greeks (who, for all their faults, are "full" of vision [E 554]) to contemporary Methodist preachers. Whitefield and Wesley, Sheridan's bugaboos, are named as servants of God and "Prophets" in *Milton* (E 118), while Whitefield is one of the Christian mystics who guard the Gate of Beulah in Golgonooza, "gentle Souls / Who guide the great Wine-press of Love" (E 227). Yet Blake himself was not a Methodist, and he surely recognized that Methodists disagreed with his primitivist argument that "All Religions Are One" (E 1). Thus the deceased Cowper tells Blake (in a visionary conversation recorded in Blake's notes to Spurzheim's *Observations on Insanity* [1817]), that Blake's universalist inspiration is healthier and grander than his own evangelical Christianity, for Blake "retain[s] health" in the midst of his apparent madness, and yet is "as mad as any of us all – *over* us all" (E 663, emphasis added). Blake certainly prefers Methodism and related forms of enthusiastic Christianity to the Deistic latitudinarianism of the genteel classes, but he does not believe it represents a revival of the bardic perspective.

How, then, does Blake, a journeyman engraver working in the heart of a dynamic and growing print culture, envision a modern recovery of the true primitive orality of the ancient bards? Blake needed access to such orality for his prophetic vocation to have true primitivist legitimacy. As we have seen, his goal as a poet was the complete restoration of the voice and perspective of the ancient bards and prophets. "The Nature of my Work is Visionary or Imaginative," he writes in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*. "[I]t is an Endeavour to Restore what the ancients calld the Golden Age" (E 555). He himself explained his vocation with the dictation model of composition, claiming that he was mere "Secretary" who records the oral compositions of spiritual speakers (E 730). If we consider this explanation carefully, however, we see that it is an example of the phenomenon it purports to explain. To speak of spiritual speakers, of angels and Daughters of Beulah, is to speak directly from a primitivist perspective. That Blake adopted the dictation model tells us only that he *had* (in his own eyes) successfully recovered the potent orality and accompanying world-view of the ancient bards. It does not tell us *how* this was done, nor how it might be done by others. To understand Blake's model of the *recovery* of ancient orality (a recovery that *enables* the adoption of the dictation model, and the subsequent redemption of literacy), we must therefore investigate new dimensions of Blake's historical and psychological myth. Did primitive orality survive the fall of bardic culture? Or was it revived *ex nihilo* after thousands of years by William Blake? To consolidate the matter in a single question, we might ask: after the victory of the primeval priests, what became of the ancient bards?

Burke and Wordsworth: Orality in Chains

One way to approach this question is to examine Blake's attitude towards primitivist-leaning contemporaries who might have seemed to have more successfully recovered ancient orality than Blake himself. George Kennedy has argued, for example (and in defiance of Sheridan), that the age of Blake saw a remarkable revival of the art of public oratory. "The challenge of great issues arising from acquisition of a vast empire, and from the American and French Revolutions, brought the response of the most eloquent political debates since antiquity," he observes (Kennedy 274). Perhaps the supreme example of this phenomenon is Edmund Burke, the vehemence of whose oratorical passion reportedly caused female spectators of the Warren Hastings hearings to be carried fainting from the hall (Tillotson, Fussell and Waingrow 1261). As a theorist of the sublime, Burke also had important theoretical affiliations with literary primitivism. Like most contemporary neoclassicist thinkers, Burke follows Longinus in defining *passion* as the essence of the sublime, and like most primitivist theorists, he believes that the most sublime and passionate language belongs to "uncultivated people" who have never been exposed to the sophistication of literate culture (Burke 340). "It may be observed," he writes, "that very polished languages, and such as are praised for their superior clearness and perspicuity, are generally deficient in strength" (340). On the other hand, "the languages of most unpolished people, have a great force and energy of expression" (340), and their uncultivated speakers "express themselves in a warmer and more passionate manner" (341). In this respect, Burke's *Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759) turns for its examples of the poetic sublime almost exclusively to Homer, Virgil, and the Old Testament.

A self-proclaimed "true Orator," Blake was undoubtedly aware that Burke was considered one of the great speakers of the age, and it is clear from his annotations to Reynolds' *Discourses* that he was familiar with both Burke and the *Enquiry*. But Burke's powerful oratory and admiration for the sublimity of ancient poetry (and in particular, for the Bible, the text he cites most frequently) seem not to have impressed Blake. True, the radical Blake had political reasons for disliking the famous opponent of the French Revolution, but the annotations to Reynolds characterize Burke as an enemy of *art*, not freedom. Blake relates an anecdote that Burke had once bought a picture from James Barry (a *Pandora*, according to Erdman [Erdman, *Prophet* 40]) "equal to Rafael or Mich Ang or any of the Italians," but which he afterward showed to his friends for a joke, saying, "I gave Twenty Guineas for this horrible Dawb" (E 640). "Such was Burkes Patronage of Art & Science," Blake concludes scornfully (E 640). Burke's failure to appreciate Barry's bold, primitivistic style of painting is only a symptom of a deeper problem, however. As Blake writes, "Burke's Treatise on the Sublime & Beautiful is founded on the Opinions of Newton & Locke" (E 659). The connection with Locke seems clear, for the psychological explication of the sublime offered in the *Enquiry* exemplifies the methods of empirical philosophy, and Burke openly acknowledges his respect and admiration for the "sagacity" of Locke (Burke 317). In tracing the origins of the highest artistic effects to the physical sensations of fear and astonishment (95-98), however, the *Enquiry* also reveals its deep Newtoniansm. In Blake's eyes, Burke had reduced artistic experience to a physiological discharge, a wholly *material* phenomenon. Thus Blake would write:

> I read Burkes Treatise when very Young at the same time I read Locke on Human Understanding & Bacons Advancement of Learning on Every one of these Books I wrote my Opinions & on looking them over find that my Notes on Reynolds in this Book are exactly Similar.
> I felt the Same Contempt & Abhorrence then; that I do now. (E 660)

The age's most noted orator is thus lumped in with Blake's *bêtes noire,* Newton, Bacon, Locke and Reynolds. Indeed, Blake sees in the *Enquiry* the theoretical foundation of Reynolds' *Discourses*, which are themselves the very manifesto of the Counter Arts Conspiracy. "[O]n this Treatise Reynolds has grounded many of his assertions. in all his Discourses," writes Blake (E 660). Burke's materialist view of art denies the primacy of Imagination and the anthropomorphic cosmology of primitive orality, "mock[ing] Inspiration & Vision" (E 660), and Blake ultimately dismisses the great orator as a "knave" (E 640).

Blake's ambivalence about William Wordsworth is similar in nature, but his feelings are complicated by his guarded admiration for Wordsworth's poetry. As we saw in Chapter II, Wordsworth wished to revive in his work the "real language of nature" spoken before "the influence of books" hardened the artificial diction of ambitious imitators into the dominant poetic dialect (Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" 267, 266). Blake's annotations to Wordsworth's collected *Poems* suggest that he had reservations about the degree to which Wordsworth had succeeded. On one hand, he was willing to rank some of Wordsworth's poems with the greatest works of the ancients. In the margin beside "To H.C. Six Years Old" Blake writes, "This is all in the highest degree Imaginative & equal to any Poet" (E 665). At other times, however, he sees evidence that dark forces are struggling to overthrow Wordsworth's poetic genius. "I see in Wordsworth the Natural Man rising up against the Spiritual Man Continually," he writes (E 665). The terminology here is that of the New Testament (1 Cor. 2:14), and of Swedenborg, who explains in *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom* (1788), in a passage annotated by Blake, that "in every Man there is a natural, spiritual and celestial Will and Understanding" (qtd. in E 606). To Blake, the "Natural Man" is the self as conceived by materialist philosophy, the "worm of sixty winters" we believe ourselves to be when our imaginations are governed by Urizenic priestcraft (E 177). The "Spiritual Man," on the other hand, is the Imagination, which by giving form to the chaos of sense experience (indeed, Blake would say it generates our very idea of "sense experience") demonstrates itself to be the *primum mobile* of human existence. As Blake writes, "Spirit & Life" are identical to "the Real Man The Imagination which Liveth for Ever" (E 783).

From Blake's perspective, then, Wordsworth seems internally divided, his energetic imagination constantly battling the suffocating effects of materialist philosophy. The tension between these two "Men" is embodied in the warp and woof of Wordsworth's poetry. That Blake would describe certain of these poems as "equal to any Poet" demonstrates that they seemed to him to possess elements of true primitive vitality.

In fact, Wordsworth often speaks in language that Blake would have recognized as genuinely primitive. In the "Preface to *The Excursion*," for example (a text Blake annotated), Wordsworth openly strikes the bardic (or perhaps, Miltonic) note, invoking the inspiration of Urania "or a greater Muse, if such / Descend to earth or dwell in highest heaven" (Wordsworth, "Preface to *The Excursion*" 147). Perhaps Blake believed the Muse heard, for the language of this poem at times pushes the boundaries of neoclassical smoothness, and, indeed, begins to sound almost Blakean:

> Descend, Prophetic Spirit! that inspir'st
> The human Soul of universal earth,
> Dreaming on things to come; and dost possess
> A metropolitan temple in the hearts
> Of mighty Poets: upon me bestow
> A gift of genuine insight; that my Song
> With star-like virtue in its place may shine,
> Shedding benignant influence, and secure,
> Itself, from all malevolent effect
> Of those mutations that extend their sway
> Throughout the nether sphere! (148)

Wordsworth never quite attains the intensity of Blake, however, and the restraint that marks this attempt at primitive sublimity is also manifest in his decision to work in blank verse, a meter Blake rejected as a "Monotonous Cadence" unsuited to the purposes of the "true Orator" (E 145, 146). The "Preface to *The Excursion*" offers even more damning evidence of imaginative corruption, however. When Wordsworth wonders that "the individual Mind . . . to the external World is fitted," Blake's annotations become sharply critical (Wordsworth, "Preface to *The Excursion*"148). Blake reads the phrase "external World" as a reference to material Nature, and balks at the notion that the human mind, inexhaustible source of creativity and beauty, is innately fitted to a Newtonian world of dead particles. "You shall not bring me down to believe such fitting & fitted I know better & Please your Lordship," he remarks (E 667). For all Wordsworth's talk of Muses and Prophetic Spirits, the "Preface to *The Excursion*" ultimately rejects anthropomorphic cosmology in favour of an unholy attempt to fit "the Human Imagination / Which is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus" (E 96) to the "Vile Body" of the Natural Man, "& to its Laws of Good & Evil & its Enmities against Mind" (E 667).[1]

Wordsworth's poetry thus shows signs of Newtonian contamination even at its most exuberantly primitivistic. An even more remarkable instance of this can be found in the first book of the *Prelude*, in which Wordsworth claims that "the very words which I have here / Recorded" are spontaneous oral prophecy. While walking in the country, Wordsworth relates, a powerful impulse of passion came upon him, and "to the open fields I told / A prophecy" (Wordsworth, *Prelude* 285). Without any conscious effort on the poet's part, the prophecy takes the form of metered, rhythmic discourse, for "poetic numbers came / Spontaneously" (285). One could hardly ask for a more dramatic example of primitivistic oral inspiration, but Wordsworth immediately begins to contextualize this event in ways that Blake would have considered problematic. He states that spontaneous oral composition is not his usual poetic practice, that his Muses are more frequently the Daughters of Memory than the Daughters of Inspiration: "[I am] not used to make / A present joy my song" (285). More significantly, at the height of his poetic rapture, Wordsworth chooses to describe himself not as a primitive bard (a figure of which he was well aware), but as a *priest*: "[C]lothed in priestly robe / My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem, / For holy services – great hopes were mine!" (285)

---

[1] Indeed, in the 1815 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (not annotated by Blake), Wordsworth would dismiss the idea that primitive poetry was actually sung by the inspiration of real Muses as "a fiction, in modern times, of slight value" (qtd. in Wittreich 127).

Blake never read the posthumously published *Prelude*, of course, but we can easily imagine his reaction to these lines if he had. Possessed by the genuine bardic impulse, Wordsworth pictures himself instead as a figure contextualized by primitivist theory as the destroyer of bardic culture. He clearly does not share Blake's Paineite approach to primitivism, and there can be little doubt that Blake would have considered this a sign of Wordsworth's subjection to the ideologies of priestcraft. He would also have remarked the succeeding passage, in which Wordsworth consciously renounces the prophetic passion, "slackening [his] thoughts by choice / And settling into gentler happiness" (285). Wordsworth's desire for "a respite from this passion" seems to spring from the same impulse toward moderation and rationality that stimulates his admiration for the eternal enemies of bardism (285).

If Wordsworth's poetry reflects what Blake sees as a subordination of orality to priestcraft, his prose goes much further. Indeed, Wordsworth's various prefaces, appendices and essays seem to Blake to be the work of another man entirely. "I do not know who wrote these Prefaces," he writes, "they are very mischievous & direct contrary to Wordsworths own Practice" (E 665). The point undoubtedly seemed amply illustrated by the "Preface to *Poems*" (1815; also annotated by Blake), which opens with a highly abstract and technical depiction of the poetic imagination. This analysis of the "powers requisite for the production of poetry" represents the poet's mind as "passive, and in a state of subjection to external objects," dividing composition into an orderly series of psychological phases governed ultimately by "Judgment" or Reason (150-1). Blake's annotations show predictable distaste for this Lockean dissection of creativity. "One Power alone makes a Poet," he retorts, "Imagination The Divine Vision" (E 665). Wordsworth may be amply endowed with this power, but his writings demonstrate that he "continually" subordinates it to the dictates of materialist philosophy (E 665). In these moments of spiritual weakness he ceases to be "equal to any Poet," and becomes "No Poet but a Heathen Philosopher at Enmity against all true Poetry or Inspiration" (E 667).

The Fall of Orality

The oral performances of Burke and Wordsworth (and by extension, those of their myriad lesser but similarly-minded peers) suggest that orality survives the fall of bardic culture primarily as a *servant* of literacy-based ideologies replacing that culture. Having fallen prey to its historical enemy, orality degenerates into *rhetoric*, the rational eloquence idealized by Sheridan and Brown, and its energy is borrowed to lend a false aura of simplicity and passion to the Newton-Locke extrapolation of priestly materialism. Thus the vehement oratory of Burke is not that of an Inspired Bard; it rather represents orality's subordination to materialist views and conservative politics. The poetry of Wordsworth (at its worst) does not embody the anthropomorphic philosophy of antiquity, but rather borrows the Human Forms of this philosophy to propagate the worship of material Nature. The harsh words with which Blake lashes the principled and generally liberal Burke ("knave") and the pioneering primitivist Wordsworth ("at Enmity against all true Poetry and Inspiration") indicate his deep dismay at what he saw as the fall of the legitimate heirs of the ancient bards into degradation and mental servitude.

Burke and Wordsworth demonstrate that orality itself, the medium of unfallen perception, cannot escape the dynamic of fall and redemption that governs the Blakean universe. This view of the cosmos is clearly derived from Christian myth, but it also has roots in Blake's theory of the eternal struggle between the Prolific and the Devouring. Because these impulses are so fundamental to the human psyche, and because "[t]he Eye altering alters all," the world is transformed as one or the other gains ascendancy (E 485). Every definite entity recognized by Blake's philosophy is therefore capable of fall (when governed by the Devouring spirit) and redemption (when ruled by the Prolific). As Blake writes in *Jerusalem*, "Every Thing has its Vermin," and orality is no exception to this rule (E 144). We should not, then, be surprised to find that the *fall* of orality figures prominently in his mythologized history. Indeed, orality's fall (and eventual redemption) is so important to Blake's theory of history and self-conception as a poet that he makes it the subject of a complex myth encompassing the main narrative threads of two of his three epic poems.

Orality as a Theme of *The Four Zoas*

Blake's most comprehensive exploration of orality's participation in the eternal dynamic of fall and redemption is found in *The Four Zoas*. In fact, one might argue that the fall of orality is the primary subject of the poem. As Blake explains while invoking his Muse, his theme is the fall and redemption of Los, "his fall into the Generation of Decay & Death & his Regeneration by the Resurrection from the dead" (E 301). From a primitivist perspective, the connection between Los (the "Eternal Prophet" [E 67]) and orality is clear, and very early in the poem Blake makes it explicit. Los' unfallen form, we are soon informed, resides in Eden and is named Urthona, and here his task is the propagation of his Emanations in "the Auricular Nerves of Human Life/ Which is the Earth of Eden" (E 301). These Emanations are the "Fairies of Albion afterwards Gods of the Heathen" (E 301). In these lines we see a tightly compressed exposition of the primitivist historical model elaborated in preceding chapters of this thesis. The direct identification of the "Earth of Eden" (that is to say, the world as it appears from the unfallen perspective) with "the Auricular Nerves of Human Life" expresses Blake's primitivist belief that the original state of humanity was both oral and paradisiacal. As he explains in the introduction to *Jersualem*, "The Primeval State of Man, was Wisdom, Art and Science" (E 146). In this Earth of Eden, Los (as Urthona) generates the Human Forms who populate the cosmology of bardic culture, the "Fairies of Albion" who become the abstract "Gods of the Heathen" after their appropriation by the primeval priests. Los-Urthona is Blake's archetype of the primitive bard, an embodiment of the Prophetic spirit, which in the age of primitive orality exercised unlimited sovereignty

("Los . . . in the Earth / Of a bright Universe Empery attended day & night" [E 301]) and filled the world with "[d]ays & nights of revolving joy" (E 301). The body of *The Four Zoas*, the story of Prophecy's fall into "the Generation of Decay & Death," is in large part a lengthy elaboration of the Urizen myth examined in the preceding chapter. Blake expands the scope of this story, however, by integrating it with another, equally complex myth. This second myth is the story of Tharmas, "Angel of the Tongue" (E 214), and it encompasses the birth, fall and redemption of Los himself. As a prelude to an analysis of this narrative, it will be useful to consider the meaning of Tharmas' title, to clarify the symbolism of the Blakean Tongue.

Symbolism of the Tongue

Because Blake believes (along with the ancients, as he thought) that human creativity (the "Poetic Genius" [E 1]) is the fundamental philosophical fact, the Human Form is the substance of his most important symbols. This Form's significance extends to its parts, and the organs of the human body therefore function symbolically throughout Blake's poetry. The tongue occupies a conspicuous and complicated place in this symbology because of its close identification with one of the four primal Zoas who manifest the first and most fundamental division of Albion, the Eternal Man. As many critics have observed, each Zoa is linked with a sense organ: Urthona (fallen form: Los) with the ear; Urizen (fallen form: Satan) with the eye; and Luvah (fallen form: Orc) with the nostrils (see, for example, Frye 277-278). This relation is strongest, however, in the case of Tharmas, the fourth Zoa. While the other Zoas are in general loosely affiliated with their respective senses, Tharmas is directly identified as "the Angel of the Tongue" (E 214), who in his fallen state becomes "Tharmas the Vegetated Tongue even the Devouring Tongue" (E 158). This fallen form is also identified in the same passage of *Jerusalem* as the "False Tongue" (E 158). The importance of the mythologized tongue is clear, then, especially when we consider that the fall of Tharmas triggers the apocalyptic events of *The Four Zoas*, and that Blake names the story of the False Tongue as one of the two epic themes of *Milton* (E 96).

The tongue's symbolic meaning is complicated by its nature as the organ of both taste and speech. In Blake's earliest work these functions are kept separate, and the word "tongue" most often appears as a simple metonym for orality. It appears a number of times in *Poetical Sketches* in this capacity. In "Fresh from the dewy hill," for example, "[t]he joyful shepherd stops his grateful song, / To hear the music of an angel's tongue" (E 416). In "Love and harmony combine," the presence of the mythologized Love is apparent from his voice: "There is Love; I hear his tongue" (E 414). The vocal function of the tongue is also emphasized in the "Prologue Intended for *Edward IV*," in which the speaker calls for "a voice like thunder, and a tongue / To drown the throat of war!" (E 439). Later, in *Songs of Innocence,* the Shepherd's "tongue shall be filled with praise," while the young chimney sweeper was sold "while yet my tongue / Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep" (E 7, 10). Similarly, in *Tiriel* the tongue appears solely as "the eloquent tongue," the organ of speech (E 280, 281). Only in *The Book of Thel* does Blake begin to focus on the second, sensory function of the tongue, "the Tongue impressed with Honey from every wind" (E 6). The sensory function grows more prominent as Blake's mythology expands to encompass his critique of materialist philosophy, and the myths of

Urizen's generation of the material body (found in *The Book of Urizen* and each of the three epics) emphasize the newly created material tongue's physicality and sensory nature. In the sixth age of the body's creation, "like a red flame a Tongue / Of thirst & of hunger appeard" (E 76; see also E 97, 337, etc.). When the mythology reaches its peak of development, the two functions frequently appear side-by-side, as in the description of the fallen body in the Bard's Song of *Milton*: "The Tongue a little moisture fills, a little food it cloys / A little sound it utters & its cries are faintly heard" (E 99; repeated in *Jerusalem* [E 198]). This passage indicates two important things. First, it demonstrates that Blake's mature myth assimilates both functions of the tongue into its symbolism. Second, it shows that the tongue, in *both* of its functions, participates in the fall of the Human Form. Frye notes the dual meaning of the word "taste" in this context: "It is perhaps not an accident that we speak of our imaginative control in this world as 'taste'" (Frye 281). When Urizen's triumph transforms the tongue from an instrument of divine song into a material organ, orality experiences a simultaneous fall ("its cries are faintly heard"), and "taste" in both senses becomes a Urizenic affair. These complex events are the subject of the first Night of *The Four Zoas*.

The Fall of Tharmas

In a primitivist reading of Blake's mythology, Tharmas, the "Angel of the Tongue," is clearly a personification of orality itself. It is not surprising, then, to find that *The Four Zoas* refers to Tharmas as the "Parent power" (as the tongue is elsewhere called the "Parent sense" [E 257]). This line has suggested to some that Tharmas is a figure of sexuality (see, for example, Damon 399) or of instinctual unity (Bloom 195), but it seems equally likely that this definition expresses the primitivist conviction that all culture originates in orality.[1] The bodily tongue might also be considered the "parent sense" in the manner described in the introduction to *Jerusalem*. Here the tongue ("the mouth of a true Orator" [E 146]) is suggested to be the means by which spiritual inspiration has its birth in the fallen world, the instrument of "taste" which shapes the poetic language of the Inspired Bard. These parental qualities of orality appear in Blake's depiction of Tharmas as the Eternal Shepherd, pastoral guardian of the oral world of Eternity, whose implement is a sheephook and whose domain is a sheepfold (E 309, 255). Tharmas' Emanations (unified as Enion – her name is a variant of "union") are thus personifications of the products of the tongue, the elements of oral culture. In their unfallen state, they are ancient oral myth; in their fallen state, the remnants of that myth as they persist in Urizenic culture.

Blake's epic of the fall and redemption of Los (Prophecy) thus opens quite logically with the fall of Tharmas and Enion (Orality and Oral Myth). Bloom has argued that Blake leaves the cause of this fall unexplained (Bloom 195), but the fact that the poem begins with Jerusalem already in flight (E 301) indicates that *The Four Zoas* begins *in media res* immediately after the fall of Albion dramatized in the first chapter of *Jerusalem* (E 147). Albion's fall has divided the Zoas and elevated the Devouring impulse to universal ascendancy, and the first scene of *The Four Zoas* shows the newly separate Tharmas vainly attempting to mitigate this Fall by giving shelter to the fleeing Jerusalem and all the lost Emanations of humanity (E 301). Tharmas' shepherd-like desire to protect the Emanations indicates that orality retains its generative-protective power (its capacity to continually replicate and give definite form to the Prolific impulse) even when alienated from the primal psychological integrity embodied in unfallen Albion. As these opening scenes illustrate, however, Tharmas and Enion are not immune to the universal Fall that results from Albion's rejection of Jesus. The Tongue and its creations have become infected with the same "jealous fears" (expressions of the self-protective Devouring impulse) that precipitate the fall of Albion (E 147). Fear, for example, has debased Tharmas' generous and Prolific protective instincts into impotent pity. He is unhappily aware of this, and openly laments that his relationship with the Emanations has been so corrupted: "It is not Love I bear to [Jerusalem] It is Pity" (E 301). For Blake, pity is always a projection of self-pity, and Tharmas thus begs Enion ("O Pity Me" [E 301]) to pity him for his own inability to resist the ascendant Devouring impulse. Enion, however, is herself in the throes of Devouring jealousy, and has become a tortured embodiment of self-righteousness. She refuses to pity Tharmas, and instead accuses him of moral corruption: "I have looked into the secret soul of him I lovd / And in the Dark recesses found Sin & cannot return" (E 301).

---

[1] This reading of the Tharmas myth is closest to that of David Erdman. Erdman also identifies Tharmas as the embodiment of the *speaking* tongue, but does not contextualize this reading in terms of Blake's literary primitivism. He thus identifies Tharmas somewhat vaguely as "the god of communication" (Erdman, *Prophet* 298), and reads the myth of Tharmas' fall in a highly restricted sense, as an allegory of Blake's abortive attempts to enter the politically charged print marketplace of the 1790's (300-306).

In the terms of Blake's historical myth, these events depict the psychological moment when orality and oral myth begin to fall under the influence of the ascendant Devouring spirit. The Urizen myths tell this story from the perspective of the primeval priests, presenting it as a moment of technology-aided cultural usurpation. In the Tharmas myth, however, we hear the story from the point of view of the ancient bards, who not only lose their cultural supremacy, but themselves become victims of the newly dominant ideologies of priestly morality and materialism. Oral myth (Enion) is corrupted into a vehicle of abstract moral law, and the Tongue itself degenerates from a mighty generator and guardian of culture (the "Parent power" and Eternal Shepherd) into a pitiful and pitying embodiment of weakness. The conversion of individual elements of oral myth into the abstract ideas of priestly philosophy is represented by the transformation of Tharmas' Emanations (considered separately) into "harlots," degraded females who offer themselves to their spiritual enemies (E 302).

The fall of the Tongue is not yet complete, however. The priestly appropriation of oral myth symbolized by the self-righteous defection of Enion is consummated in the death of Tharmas. Horrified at what he and his Emanation have become, Tharmas sinks "down into the sea a pale white corse," vowing to return only "when the Day of Clouds is oer" (E 302). This sea is the "sea of Time & Space" (E 337), one of Blake's many symbols of the materialistic cosmos, and Tharmas' death and submersion signifies the assimilation of orality by materialist philosophy. The Tongue now ceases to exist as "Parent power" and Eternal Shepherd, and passes instead into an even more deeply fallen existence as the Spectre of Tharmas, which is drawn out of Tharmas' submerged corpse by the corrupted Enion (E 302).

The Spectre of Tharmas is an embodiment of *fallen* orality, for a Spectre is the rational, Devouring aspect of any Human Form, "a ravening devouring lust continually craving & devouring" (E 360). The Spectre thus represents orality as it exists *within* the fallen world, participating in its fallenness. In its moralistic pomposity ("If thou hast sinned and are polluted know that I am pure" [E 303]) and brilliant but corrupt beauty ("in his depths / The dazzlings of gems shone clear" [E 303]), the Spectre embodies Blake's vision of Burkean oratory and Wordsworthian naturalistic poetry. Like these two Lockean bards, it has an "envenomed tongue" with the power to drive others to "the dark and dismal infinite where Thought roams up & down" (E 303), that is to say, the materialistic cosmos, "the place whence he emergd" (E 304).

The Spectre of Tharmas has an important part to play in the fall of the Eternal world, for the material fibres of his body ("every vein and lacteal threading" [E 302]) are woven by fallen Enion into a "tabernacle" for Jerusalem (E 302). Since critics disagree about the symbolic meaning of this tabernacle, it will be useful to briefly clarify its significance. In the Old Testament, the "tabernacle" is the tent that protects the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 26), and Blake at times uses the word in this sense. In *Jerusalem*, for example, Jerusalem herself is "in every man, a Tent & Tabernacle of Mutual Forgiveness" (E 203). At other times, however, the tabernacle's creator is fallen, and the word designates a veil concealing corruption, as in the cases of Vala's "Scarlet Tabernacle" (E 167) and Enitharmon's "triple Female Tabernacle for Moral Law" (E 247). In the first Night of *The Four Zoas*, the tabernacle is *for* Jerusalem, a covering either to protect her from the ravages of the fallen world, or to bury her behind a painted veil of false holiness. Damon argues for the former (Damon 395), but the latter clearly seems the case here. The corrupted Enion, stricken with the terrors of abstract morality, creates the tabernacle as "a Covering for [her] Sins" (E 304) and weaves it using a "shining loom of Vegetation," or materialist philosophy (E 303). Jerusalem must be covered by this philosophy because she is the Emanation of Albion, an embodiment of the city of prophets, a personification of Blake's utopia (E 144). Considered as an element of Blake's historical myth, she is the defeated culture of the ancient bards and prophets, which is why Tharmas (the Tongue) is her guardian (E 301). In *The Four Zoas*, however, Tharmas is weakened by the ascendant Devouring impulse and is unable to protect her, and his transformation into the Spectre of Tharmas is specifically triggered by the sight of the corrupted Enion weaving her tabernacle (E 303). If we consider Jerusalem's symbolic meaning, her disappearance beneath a covering of Vegetation and Tharmas' simultaneous transformation into a Spectre seem clearly allegorical of orality's historical fall into corruption (exemplified, as we have seen, in Burke and Wordsworth), an event that occurs in the course of the materialist usurpation of primitive bardic culture. That Jerusalem is hidden, not destroyed, reflects Blake's prophetic conviction that recovery of the bardic utopia is always possible, although (as we will see) such a revival will only occur when the priestly culture represented by the tabernacle is destroyed (mythologically, in the Last Judgment). The Spectre of Tharmas plays a crucial role in the tabernacle myth, for his body is the material out of which it is woven, an image that represents Blake's belief (explicated in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) that materialist culture is constructed wholly out of abstracted (that is, fallen) elements of primitive oral culture. For this reason, the orality-derived tabernacle is revealed in the next scene of *The Four Zoas* to be the foundation of the material cosmos, the "Circle of Destiny" which bounds the Sea of Time and Space and defines the space of Ulro (E 302-303).

The Closing of the Gate of the Tongue

That Tharmas's fall symbolizes the decline of primitive orality is further demonstrated in the events following his conversion into a vegetated Spectre. The first of these events might be called the defection of the Muses. The Daughters of Beulah, Blake's Muses in both *Milton* and *The Four Zoas* (E 96, 301), are horrified by the sight of the Spectre of Tharmas ("this Spectre of Tharmas is Eternal Death," they cry [E 303]), and respond to its generation by closing the Gate of the Tongue, the Western Gate of Golgonooza, city of Art (E 303). This important event is mentioned frequently in Blake's work, notably in *Jerusalem,* where the lengthy description of Golgonooza in Chapter One explains that the "the Western Gate fourfold, is closd," so to remain until the defeat of Urizen and the revival of the anthropomorphic cosmos, "the last day, when the graves shall yield their dead" (E 156). Historically, the defection of the Muses and the closing of the Gate of the Tongue represent the end of authentic primitive poetry, a necessary consequence of the fall of orality (the birth of the Spectre of Tharmas). Because such poetry is the primary means by which unfettered energy takes imaginative form, Blake's many portrayals of the Gate's closure indicate that this event is a crucial part of the general contraction of perception associated with the rise of priestly culture. In his description of the fallen Sons and Daughters of Los in *Jerusalem*, for instance, he first notes that "the western gate in them is clos'd, / Having a wall builded against it" (E 158). He then explains that the gates of the other sense organs open into limited spaces, for "the North is Breadth, the South is Heighth & Depth: / The East is Inwards" (E 158). The Gate of the Tongue, however, opens (when it does open) "Outwards every way" into limitless expansion and freedom (E 158). The closure of this Gate bars the path outwards, away from the "vegetative world," but also binds the *other* senses, for "thereby the gates / Eastward & Southward & Northward, are incircled with flaming fires" (E 158). The fall of orality and the termination of the production of primitive poetry have such damaging effects on human perception that these events form the climax of the messengers' report to the Council of God at the end of Night the First of *The Four Zoas*: "The daughters of Beulah terrified have closd the Gate of the Tongue" (E 311).[1]

The Birth of Los

The creation of Ulro and subsequent closing of the Gate of the Tongue conclude the narrative of Tharmas' fall. The story of Ulro's creation is retold from the perspective of Urizen in later Nights of *The Four Zoas*, but at this point in the poem, the materialistic cosmos of priestcraft is already complete.[2] The Circle of Destiny bounds the fallen world,

---

[1] An interesting development of the "Gate" imagery is found in *Jerusalem*, in the passages in which Los rages against the terrors of the Druidic world. Los observes that within this world, "the affectionate touch of the tongue is closd in by deadly teeth" (E 185). Here the *teeth* are the Gate of the Tongue: when closed, they prevent speech. Blake goes further to develop the structure of the fleshly (material) mouth as a metaphor for both Urizenic society and the individuals who participate in it. On the surface of the fallen mouth is the hypocritical "soft smile of friendship," which represents the facade of benevolence presented by priestly culture (E 185). But this is only a "a net & a trap"(E 185), for it masks "deadly teeth" representing the "war & princedom & victory" that lie behind the moralistic idealism of Urizen (E 147). Imprisoned behind these teeth (a fleshly, *material* barrier) is the "affectionate" (kind, passionate) tongue, orality and the humane culture it would create if left to function unhindered.

[2] As a general principle, Blake's myths have a broad temporal direction (driven by the dynamic of Fall and Redemption), but at the level of individual narrative events there is no consistent adherence to conventional principles of temporal logic. As a single example, Tharmas dies and is transformed into the Spectre of Tharmas in the beginning of Night the First, but he nevertheless momentarily appears in his unfallen form at the end of the same Night to embrace a newly born Enitharmon, even though she had already been born, grown up and married on the immediately preceding pages. The newborn Enitharmon is then killed permanently by Enion, "never to be revived," even though she appears alive and well a few pages later (E 312). Such myths cannot be read in strict chronological sequence, and it is more correct to say they are governed only by the dream-logic of liberated imagination. For discussion of the anti-materialist

Jerusalem is covered by a tabernacle woven from the Spectral remains of dead orality, and humanity seems condemned to mental slavery. The eternal dynamic of the Prolific and the Devouring continues to function, however, and the apparent stasis of this new, fallen world is broken when Enion, now resident in Ulro and "[t]errified in her own Creation" (E 303), contemplates the closure of the Gate of the Tongue and is stricken with remorse. It is, however, "[t]oo late now to repent," and Enion is only able to neutralize the Spectre of Tharmas by absorbing it into herself, "[m]ingling his horrible brightness with her tender limbs" (E 304). This union of primitive oral myth (repentant Enion) and fallen orality results in the birth of Los (Prophecy) and Enitharmon (Fallen Beauty; when unfallen, Enitharmon is not a separate entity from Los-Urthona). It may seem odd that Los, the hero of Blake's mature myth (and the figure with which he most closely identified), is presented as the child of a problematic union of truth and corruption, but we must remember that Los is the *fallen* form of Urthona, and therefore embodies prophecy *as it exists* within the fallen world. This is also clear from context: Enion remains within Ulro throughout this episode, and the infants are born "on the rocks," symbols of materialism (E 304). Los and Enitharmon are true children of primitive orality, doubly descended from the Tongue, but they are *tainted* children, born of Ulro and fathered by a Spectre. If we translate this myth into the terms of Blake's primitivist history, we see it is an allegory of the birth of Prophecy *within* priestly culture. Prophecy, *as it exists after the Fall* (a crucial distinction, as we shall see), has its origin in the encounter of ancient oral myth (Enion) with the fallen orality (the Spectre of

---

resonances of these qualities of Blake's poetry, see Donald Ault's "Incommensurability and Interconnection in Blake's Anti-Newtonian Text" (in *Essential Articles for the Study of William Blake*. Ed., Nelson Hilton. Hamden, CT: Archon, 1986. 141-173).

Tharmas) that survives the destruction of bardic culture. Repentant Enion personifies the totality of the relics of ancient orality (Homer's epics, for example, or the Bible) that drift through history, gradually fading in cultural strength (as the once-beautiful Enion becomes "blind & age-bent" and eventually fades into a disembodied voice [E 310]). As Enion seeks throughout fallen history to achieve reunion with Tharmas, these relics seek to revive the ancient culture of unfallen orality by stimulating the fallen reader's latent oral energies. That is to say, the relics of ancient orality are an enduring stimulus to primitivist revival. However, in the fallen psyche (and we here remember that Los is born in Ulro), the orality that is stimulated is *corrupted,* the Spectre of Tharmas rather than Tharmas himself. A kind of poetry (Los) and a kind of aesthetic beauty (Enitharmon) result from this encounter of residual ancient orality and contemporary fallen orality, but they are the *fallen* prophecy and beauty of Wordsworth's blank verse or Burke's oratory.

For this reason, Blake's depiction of the newborn Eternals emphasizes their corruption. Their first act is to abandon Enion, eagerly absorbing the "spectrous life" she acquired from the Spectre of Tharmas "in pride and haughty joy" (E 304). Los and Enitharmon thus appear destined to perpetuate the Devouring orality of their Spectral father, but at this point, the "Divine Hand" intervenes through the agency of a Muse (E 305). Eno[1], Daughter of Beulah and Muse of *The Four Zoas* itself (E 301), creates within the fallen world a special space for Los and Enitharmon, the "Seven thousand years" of prophetic history, and within this space "Every year made windows into Eden" (E 304). The penetration of Ulro by thousands of "windows into Eden" pierces the bounding Circle of Destiny, peppering the darkness of Ulro with patches of Edenic light. From this point on, Los and Enitharmon have intermittent access to the unfallen perspective as they pass in and out of these patches on their journey through history. The existence of these patches signifies Blake's belief that historical (and psychological) moments exist in which the bardic perspective is revived and the world again becomes "the Earth of Eden," (identified, as we have seen, with "the Auricular Nerves of Human Life"). In the darkness between the patches, however, the fallen world ceases to be "the Earth of Eden," and Los is cut off from primitive orality except through the corrupting medium of his own Spectral nature. Thus we see that Los fluctuates erratically between Urizenic moral judgement and prophetic inspiration, first driving all the unnamed Males jealously away from Enitharmon (E 305), then knocking her down in prophetic righteousness when she tries to sing the "Song of Death" (E 306) that relates the tale of her Night and Dream (the subject of *Europe*).

---

[1] Damon notes that her name is an anagram of "Eon," a rarely used term for Emanation (Damon 125-127), but we may also observe that "Eno" is the reversed spelling of the word "One." Eno may thus represent the Daughters of Beulah (the Muses of Poetry) considered as a totality, as Enion ("union") seems to represent the totality of the products of the Tongue.

That Blake wrote his illuminated plates in reverse (or mirror-image) writing is generally agreed, and this might serve as a clue to some of his mythic names. "Los," for instance, is "soul" reversed, with the "u" (you) removed. The name thus suggests Los' status as an *externalized* personification of "Poetic Genius," which to Blake was the "true Man" (E 1), the soul of humanity. Note also that the "u" is restored in his *unfallen* name, Urthona ("Earth-owner," or "u-r- the one"). I am indebted to Henry S. Whittier of Dalhousie University for these and other insights into the significance of mirroring in Blake.

The myth of Tharmas thus evolves from a tale of the overthrow of bardic culture into a study of the possibilities for prophetic expression in the fallen world. When Los walks into a space illuminated by the Muse's windows, we see that these possibilities are real, and the primitive orality of Eden finds a new expression in his prophetic voice. He then gives utterance to the unfallen orality of Tharmas, his Spectral father's original form, and earns his title as "Vehicular Form of strong Urthona" (E 202), the Zoa who propagates the Human Forms of oral myth in "the Auricular Nerves of Human Life." His greatest labour, often described by Blake, is the construction of the City of Art, Golgonooza. The foundations of Golgonooza are laid by Tharmas, consistent with a primitivist reading of this myth (E 340), but the completion of the city is the task of Los, who builds it as fallen humanity's bulwark against "uttermost Extinction" and complete spiritual death (E 340). The protective, Tharmic nature of the illuminated Los is also apparent in his role of "Watchman of Eternity" (E 119) who guards Albion in the dark eras that succeed the Fall (E 141). In this role, he creates the oral prophets of the Old Testament who rise up against the "Kings & Nobles of the Earth" created by Rahab (Mystery) and Tirzah (Moral Virtue) (E 228). Blake envisions himself in *Milton* as metaphysically united with Los in his militant, truly prophetic aspect, which appears to him in "fierce glowing fire" (E 117). "Los had enterd into my soul," he writes. "His terrors now posses'd me whole! I arose in fury & strength" (E 117). When in contact with the Edenic world, Los is Blake's mythologized self-image, and the image of every poet and painter who has fought against the Devouring principle since the Fall of Man.

When Los leaves the light cast by the Edenic windows, however, he returns to the mental darkness of Ulro. In these phases of his journey through history, he draws his prophetic energy from his immediate father, the Spectre of Tharmas, giving voice not to primitive orality, but to *fallen* orality, and his tongue is the "envenomed tongue" that stimulates the energies of the listener only to direct them into imaginative channels prepared by priestly philosophy. The darkened Los also makes frequent appearances in Blake's mythology. Cut off from the vision of Eternity in Chapters Six and Seven of *The Book of Urizen,* for example, Los binds Orc (Rebellious Energy) to a mountaintop with the chain of Jealousy (E 80), a story also told in the fifth Night of *The Four Zoas* (E

340). Perhaps the most vivid and important portrayal of the fallen Los appears in the first Night of this epic. Here the young Los, having just struck down Enitharmon for singing the Song of Death, has his first encounter with Urizen. He demands the return of the oral energies and myths appropriated by priestly culture. "Thou hast Abundance which I claim as mine," he declares (E 307). But Los' pity for Urizen's ally Enitharmon (the prophet's pity for the false beauty he must destroy) weakens him, and Los instead agrees to marry her (i.e., he accepts and embraces this beauty instead). This act marks the surrender of the prophetic imagination ("the Divine Body" [E 663]) to Urizenic materialism, an event symbolized in the unholy Eucharist of Los's and Enitharmon's wedding feast ("They eat the fleshly bread, they drank the nervous wine" [E 307]). As Tharmas weakened under the influence of the Devouring impulse of fear, Los weakens under that of pity, and his marriage to fallen beauty seduces him from the labours of Mental War to impotence and passivity under the rule of Enitharmon and Urizen. The latter, meanwhile, is left to pursue his battles with Luvah and to further drive the fading Enion "far into the deathful infinite" (E 324).

In this state of slavery and degradation, Los becomes an image of every poet and artist who ever succumbed to the Devouring impulse and gave his creative powers to the service of priestcraft. Blake implies that the historical impact of these fallen poets has been significant: the material body of Urizen and the "links of fate" are both constructed by Los at his most deeply fallen (E 336). Indeed, Blake suggests that these Fallen Bards are a primary means by which the ideologies of priestcraft are promulgated, especially during the early phases of fallen history in which literacy remains a rare skill. In *The Song of Los,* for example, Adam and Noah (the earliest post-Fall men) witness "Urizen give his Laws to the Nations / By the hands of the children of Los" (E 67). Thus Blake's historical myth receives a new and frightening twist: when both Tharmas and Los are fallen, the literate priests rule with the *aid* of orality, and as Blake writes in *Jerusalem* (describing the closing of the Gate of the Tongue), "every energy [is] renderd cruel" (E 185).

The Fallen Bard in History

The Fallen Bard (mythologized as fallen Los) is an important figure in Blake's historical model. Historically (and of course psychologically, for the historical model parallels the progress of the individual soul), the enslavement of orality marks the moment of priestcraft's greatest triumph, the binding of the Prolific spirit to the service of its eternal enemy. Since the bard is an archetype of humanity itself ("all are alike in the Poetic Genius" [E 1]), the degraded and enslaved Los represents the nadir of the human condition. For this reason, the Fallen Bard is a recurring Blakean character; not only is he mythologized as Los, he appears *in propria persona* as early as the "King Edward III" fragment in *Poetical Sketches*. This unfinished playscript, set in the fourteenth century, juxtaposes ambitious noblemen and plain-speaking commoners in what seems to have been planned as a satire of English monarchical militarism. That this is the meaning of the fragment has not always been clear, however. "King Edward III" has often appeared to critics as aggressively jingoistic, thick with extravagant praise of English liberty and strength of arms. Frye accepts this reading, and bemusedly remarks that "[a]pparently, if one believes that England has always been the home of democracy and constitutional government . . . one can also believe that the Hundred Years' War was a blow struck solely in the interests of progress" (Frye 179). David Erdman has observed, however, that even the most favourable eighteenth-century histories of Edward's reign "showed it filled with aggressive wars, cruel executions, and hypocritical manifestoes" (Erdman, *Prophet* 65). Erdman argues convincingly that Blake's bloodthirsty medieval noblemen reflect this view, yearning as they do to "reap rich harvest in the fields of Cressy" (E 430). The frequent apostrophes to Liberty in the piece ("O Liberty, how glorious art thou!" cries the bloody-minded monarch [E 432]) are therefore best read as satirical representations of the hypocritical rhetoric favoured by the British government during the war with the American colonies (Erdman, *Prophet* 63-74). These representations reach their climax with the arrival of a "minstrel" who sings two songs[1] intended to persuade the English troops that Edward's ambition and the cause of Liberty are one and the same (E 435). These "suitably bloody chants" are meant as elaborate parodies of late-eighteenth-century jingoistic verse, argues Erdman, who notes their resemblance to the military odes of William Whitehead, poet laureate to George III (Erdman, *Prophet* 72). In any case, Blake's minstrel celebrates killing, death and Liberty alternately, gleefully portraying the English troops as "savage monsters" who desolate the landscape and blot out the sun (E 437), and calling on them to cheerfully prepare their hearts for "Death's cold hand" as they defend "Heaven's cause" (E 440). The minstrel, in fact, is a hired siren who uses the inspirational power of orality (what Lowth calls "the jocund and captivating style" of oral poetry [Lowth 81-2]) to spur politically naive soldiers to greater feats of murder and mayhem. As if to make the minstrel's moral dubiousness more clear, Blake explicitly portrays him as a royal hireling. Peter Blunt, the fragment's Shakespearean clown, introduces the first song to Dagworth and William by blurting out that "the Prince has made the minstrel a squire, and given him I don't know what" (E 435). The song's seductive appeal is also made explicit by Blunt, who continues, "I can't tell whether he don't mention us all one by one; and he is to write another about all us that are to die, that we may be remembered in Old England, for all our blood and bones is in France" (E 435). This is a very dark reading of the bard's traditional role as companion of kings and one almost completely foreign to the mainstream of Romantic-era historical and literary thought. A prominent exception is Thomas Love Peacock, and the minstrel of "Edward III" seems surprisingly close to Peacock's view of the ancient bard as a lackey of the primitive king, "an organ to disseminate the fame of his achievements . . . always ready to celebrate the strength of his arm, being first duly inspired by his liquor" (Peacock 4).[1] The primitivist Blake rejected such a view, of course, and Erdman is closer to the truth when he calls this minstrel "a corrupt descendant of the ancient bards" (Erdman, *Prophet* 72). We may clarify the meaning of this "corruption," however, if we consider the minstrel as an exemplar of fallen orality. The minstrel is in fact a historical manifestation of the married and enslaved Los, a *fallen* bard who serves the institutions of materialist priestcraft, using the energies of orality to create songs vibrant with the dangerous beauty of the Spectre of Tharmas, and whose only purpose is to serve Enitharmon's goal of abolishing Humanity (in the primitivistic sense, the oral cosmos; in a more conventional sense, the humane emotions), replacing it with "War & Princedom & Victory & Blood" (E 306).

---

[1] Erdman argues that the minstrel's second song is the seemingly unrelated "A War Song to Englishmen," also included in *Poetical Sketches* (Erdman "Textual Notes" 847).

---

[1] Peacock suggests the eternal nature of his own vision of bardism in *Maid Marian* (1818), which contains a minstrel based on Robert Southey, the ex-radical Poet Laureate (1813-43).

Since "King Edward III" ends abruptly with the minstrel's first song, it is impossible to know how (or if) the young Blake planned to develop the figure of the minstrel. His sense of the historic and cosmic importance of fallen orality seems only to have grown in the years that followed, however. *The Four Zoas* would bring the intertwined myths of Tharmas and Los, an important intellectual substructure to the more nearly completed epics that followed. Blake's most spectacular return to the theme of the Fallen Bard, however, is unquestionably *Milton*, composed during the years of his own servitude under William Hayley. The Felpham years mark the point at which Blake himself came closest to embodying the fallen Los, and in his own psychological escape from the Urizenic influence of his "Corporeal Friend" Hayley (E 98), he would find inspiration for a myth that identifies the redemption of the Fallen Bard with the salvation of humanity itself.

Milton as Fallen Bard

For Blake, as for most of his contemporaries, the work of John Milton seemed to mark the high-water point of native English poetry. Blake had admired Milton from his youth, as he wrote to John Flaxman: "Milton lovd me in childhood & shewd me his face"(E 707). His early poetry is thick with Miltonic diction and allusion, as many critics have observed. "That Milton was in his consciousness and imagination 'from the beginning' has become a commonplace," writes Gleckner (Gleckner 1). It is also clear from Blake's famous critique of Milton in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (E 34-5) that this admiration changed to ambivalence as Blake arrived at his own poetic and intellectual maturity. The reason for this change, framed in the terms of Blake's own primitivist theory, is that by the mid- 1790's Blake had come to believe that *Paradise Lost* was a uniquely significant embodiment of fallen orality. Such a conclusion was unusual from the perspective of eighteenth-century primitivism, for Milton was greatly admired by the primitivists of this period, in spite of his Puritanism. It was well-known that Milton had thought of himself as a heroic figure, a modern-day bard whose goal was the creation of a national epic rivalling those of Homer, Virgil, and "those Hebrews of old" (Milton, "Plan" 8), and the opinion of most eighteenth-century writers was that no one had come closer to succeeding. Blackwell, for instance, seriously compares him with Homer and Virgil (Blackwell 66), while Wordsworth's admiration (expressed most eloquently in the sonnet "London, 1802") approached idolatry, according to a contemporary (Wittreich 135). For Burke, Milton is the only modern poet worth quoting as an exemplar of the true poetic sublime (e.g. Burke 100-1).

This sublimity was most visible in the figure of Satan, as Burke observed (105-6), and Blake's identification of Satan as the embodiment of Desire (that is, energy or passion) in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* indicates that he, too, approved of this character on primitivist grounds (E 34). He would certainly have agreed with Shelley's later remark that "[n]othing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*" (Shelley 962). But as both Shelley and Blake noticed (indeed, as did Burke, by inference) the other characters in the poem do not seem to be equally powerfully drawn. Characteristically, Blake would go farther than anyone else in interpreting this fact, and his remarks in *Marriage* indicate that Milton's comparatively flat depiction of the Trinity seemed to him a deliberate expression of loyalty to priestly Christianity. In Blake's eyes, Milton had reproduced the crime of the primeval priests, converting the energetic Human Forms of ancient Hebrew prophetic culture into abstract deities embodying principles of materialist philosophy. As Blake writes indignantly, "in Milton; the Father is Destiny, the Son, a Ratio of the five senses. & the Holy-ghost, Vacuum!" (E 35). Far from reviving the orality of the ancient bards, Milton's retelling of the Old Testament transforms these energetic myths into an allegory of the *suppression* of energy by "the restrainer or reason" (E 34).

Even so, all was not so simple. *Paradise Lost* could not credibly be dismissed as simply a Puritan tract in blank verse, and Milton ignored as merely a priest with bardic pretensions. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* argues that Milton's God is a rational abstraction, but it also suggests that his Satan is a true piece of bardic inspiration, a living Human Form embodying the spontaneity that resists regulation and abstraction. As Frye points out, "Milton's Satan is Orc" (Frye 219). Shelley's similar view of Satan led him to conclude that *Paradise Lost* should be read as a Romantic document, a satire whose intention (like that of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) is the subversion of traditional Christianity. "Milton's poem," he writes, "contains within itself a philosophical refutation of that system of which, by a strange but natural antithesis, it has been a chief popular support" (Shelley 962). "It is a mistake to suppose that [Satan] could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil," he adds (962). To Blake, however, Milton's cold portrayal of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and his rationalist psychology (love "hath his seat/ In Reason" he writes in *Paradise Lost* [Milton, *Paradise* 181]) both demonstrate that such a reading oversimplifies the complexities of Milton's position. Milton's decision to embody vitality and energy as Satan, the eternal enemy of mankind, is not a deliberate subversion of orthodox Christianity, but rather the expression of a genuine belief that these are destabilizing forces in a rationally ordered universe. That he possesses the power to create such an energetic Satan proves that he is a "true Poet" (E 35), but his decision to create such a figure *as* Satan proves that he is a sincere adherent of the regulating philosophies of the *enemies* of poetry. Realizing this, Blake concludes that the psyche of Milton (like that of Wordsworth, and indeed, of all Fallen Bards) is a divided place, a site of Mental War in which the abstractions of priestcraft struggle mightily with the energies of primitivistic genius. The former govern Milton's conscious mind, while the latter strain against the chains of these regulating philosophies. "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God," writes Blake, "and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it" (E 35).

This conflict is visible in the very structure of Milton's verse. Milton had chosen his meter quite deliberately in imitation of the ancient epic poets, "English Heroic Verse without Rime, as that of Homer in Greek, and Virgil in Latin" (Milton, *Paradise* 4). He had also conceived of his writing as fundamentally oral in character, rejecting "the jingling sound of like endings" as "a fault avoyded by the learned Ancients both in Poetry and all good Oratory" (4). But in his insistence on the "apt Numbers" of blank verse, Milton again betrays his inclination to regulate the energies of orality (4). As Blake writes in the introduction to *Jerusalem*, the blank verse "used by Milton" is a "Montonous Cadence" completely unsuited to the purposes of a "true Orator" (E 145-6).

Milton is *not* such an orator, then, despite his achievement in creating Satan. He is instead something quite different, and indeed, quite dangerous: he is Los under the spell of Enitharmon, a "true Poet" who has fallen prey to the Devouring spirit. In defiance of logic, and indeed of his own best interests, Milton uses his formidable creative energies to wage Mental War on behalf of the enemies of poetry. He is, in fact, the Fallen Bard *par excellence*, the greatest tragedy of English poetic history, and the "bondage" of Miltonic blank verse is the fallen orality of a tongue governed by the Devouring philosophy of priestcraft (E 146).

Anatomy of a Fallen Bard

As the most powerful English bard ever to side with the priests, Milton is an appropriate subject for a primitivist epic, and Blake shows his commitment to this view of Milton's life and work by foregrounding questions of orality from the beginning of *Milton*. This poem is structured by two closely related narrative threads, as the opening invocation indicates. The first is the story of "the journey of immortal Milton" from the realms of Eternity to Blake's cottage at Felpham (E 96). But Blake also requests that the Muses "Tell . . . of the False Tongue!" which resides "vegetated" in the land of Ulro (E 96). This two-part invocation indicates that *Milton* will integrate its fallen protagonist's story with that of *The Four Zoas*, for as we have seen, the "False Tongue" is another name for the fallen Tharmas, an identity established in *Jerusalem* when Los surveys the degenerate Human Forms of the fallen world and sees "Tharmas the Vegetated Tongue even the Devouring Tongue: / A threefold region, a false brain: a false heart: / And false bowels: altogether composing the False Tongue" (E 158).

Within *Milton* itself, the False Tongue is connected to the character Milton by a chain of interlocking symbols. In the description of the activities of the Sons of Los in the first Book, the False Tongue is identified as "Ulro, Seat of Satan, / Which is the False Tongue beneath Beulah: it is the Sense of / Touch" (E 125). If we unpack these lines, we see that the False Tongue is here stated to be identical both with Ulro, the materialist perspective (constructed from the Spectre of Tharmas in *The Four Zoas*), and with the Lockean sense of touch, which to the fallen mind seems to confirm the existence of the material universe. Ulro (and therefore the False Tongue) is also the "Seat of Satan" (as a country-house or estate might be the seat of a nobleman), the power-base and home of Blake's own poetic representation of evil. This Satan is not the rebellious Orc of *Paradise Lost,* but the form taken by Urizen in the material world: "Satan is Urizen / Drawn down by Orc & the Shadowy Female into Generation" (E 104).

We might naturally think that from a primitivist perspective, *literacy* would be the "Seat of Satan," but by identifying fallen orality as such, Blake suggests that literacy, the concrete materialization of oral language, might best be understood as simply the most extreme form of fallen orality. The conversion of the word into an external, material object is the logical extension (and exacerbation, as we saw in the preceding chapter) of a process that begins *internally* when the Devouring impulse begins to channel the energies of orality into the creation of ideologies of stasis and regulation (of which materialism is history's great example). The False Tongue (that is, fallen orality, and by extension, literacy), is thus the "seat" of the Devouring impulse, the foundation and symbol of Urizenic power, the seal and propagator of the priestly triumph over the ancient bards.

Satan, personification of the error propagated by the False Tongue, is a major character in *Milton*, and through him Blake's myth of Milton blends with his story of fallen orality. The action of the main narrative begins only when Milton, "unhappy tho in heav'n" (E 96), realizes that the False Tongue of Ulro is also the foundation and symbol of his own poetic power: "I in my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One! He is my Spectre!" (E 108). The relationship between primitive and fallen orality expressed in Swedenborgian terms in the case of Wordsworth is here developed in a metaphor of *incrustation*: Satan is "the Reasoning Power in Man . . . a false Body: an Incrustation over my Immortal Spirit" (E 142). This "immortal spirit" hidden by the incrustation of Satan is Milton's original and true nature, the creative energy he himself characterizes *as* Satan, the passion whose natural expression is *unfallen* orality.[1] Blake externalizes Milton's immortal self in the figure of the Bard of Eternity, whose "prophetic Song" (E 96), an outpouring of authentic primitive orality, awakens Milton to awareness of his own bardic genius. This genius had been hidden by the incrustation of Devouring impulse and rational philosophy that Blake personifies as Satan (this is perhaps why Satan is "the Limit of Opacity" [E 338]), but its rediscovery is sparked by the powerful orality of the "loud voic'd Bard" (E 108). The song completed, the Bard flies into the bosom of Milton (E 108), symbolizing the rebirth of his true bardic nature.

---

[1] Note that during Milton's journey to Earth, his "real and immortal Self" (E 109) resides in the oral paradise of Eden, whose human manifestation is the "Auricular Nerves of Human Life" (E 301).

These events signify the moment at which the Prolific impulse, the spirit of ancient orality, regains ascendency in Milton's heart. Blake believed that this impulse had always been strong in the creator of *Paradise Lost,* but its expression had been choked and perverted by the "incrustation" of Urizenic philosophy. Acting as a filter between his genius and the outside world, this incrustation had perverted the spontaneous energy of primitive orality into the regulated forms of *fallen* orality, turning Milton into a Fallen Bard and *Paradise Lost* into a tangle of self-contradiction. Having recognized these things through the influence of the Bard of Eternity, Milton is able to begin the process of redeeming himself and his work. Because Milton is the supreme exemplar and model of all Fallen Bards, and because the bard in all his forms is an archetype of humanity itself, the redemption of Milton will serve as a model for that of every fallen poet, and therefore for every human being.

Redemption of the Fallen Bard

Milton's recognition of his error through the influence of the Bard of Eternity marks the first of four stages of redemption, stages paralleled in *The Four Zoas* in Blake's myth of the redemption of Tharmas and Los. The first stage is the rekindling of the incrusted and weakened bardic energy of the Fallen Bard by sparks of true primitive orality. In *Milton,* as we have seen, this occurs when Milton hears the "high tone'd Song" of the Bard of Eternity and the Bard enters his bosom (E 102).[1] But if we return for a moment to the question of Blake's own poetic vocation, we see that this principle applies equally to Blake himself. The Bard's Song, with its narrative of Satan's usurpation of the eternal duties of Palamabron, is generally considered an allegory of the trials of the prophetic artist in fallen society, modelled on Blake's struggle to preserve his artistic independence from the well-meaning but uncomprehending William Hayley (Frye 327, Bloom 313, Erdman 424, etc.). The parallels between Blake's life at Felpham and the Bard's Song are too well-known to be repeated here, but we may observe that in these years Blake himself courted the fate of Milton, risking the incrustation of his own "immortal self" by the Satan of the Counter Arts Conspiracy. For Blake, however, primitive orality was always close at hand in the Bible, and his determination to resist Hayley's influence and stick to his primitivist theory of art (that is, the dictation model of composition) was fuelled by his conviction that the Bible was the greatest work of poetry in history. What was against the Bible could not be right, and in an 1803 letter to Butts, Blake explains that his defiance of Hayley is commanded by spiritual speakers who speak in the language of the Old Testament prophets. "[I]f all the World should set their faces against [the poem *Milton*]," he writes, "I have Orders to set my face like a flint against their faces & my forehead against their foreheads Ezekiel iii C 9v." (E 730). Blake heard the Bard of Eternity every time he read the Bible, and, like his mythologized Milton, was inspired to repudiate his own (rather more genteel) Satan, who was "as much averse to my poetry as he is to a Chapter in the Bible" (E 730).

---

[1] In Milton's instantaneous recognition that he *is* "that Satan," we also see traces of the primitivist thesis that the spontaneous orality of ancient bardic culture is innately and profoundly mimetic (see Chapter II).

The Fallen Bard's redemption in *The Four Zoas* also begins with an encounter with the weakened but still powerful remnants of ancient orality. Having been killed in the first Night and transformed into a Spectre, Tharmas is revived in the third Night by

Urizen's attempt to destroy Ahania, his Emanation. Ahania appears to represent the pleasures that result from a proper, balanced (i.e. unfallen) use of rationality, but Urizen, having just proclaimed his Godhood, decides that she represents "all my indolence my weakness & my death" (E 329). He throws her from Eternity and she crashes to the Earth, and Tharmas emerges out of a watery flame that shoots up at the point of impact. The Zoa of the Tongue is reborn in a fury of oral energy ("the dead reard up his Voice & stood on the resounding shore" [E 330]) but this energy is now disorganized and chaotic. As the Spectre of Urthona remarks, Tharmas, "once the mildest son of heaven," has "now become a Rage / A terror to all living things" (E 333). Still divided from Enion (Oral Myth) and still subject to the general ascendancy of the Devouring impulse, Tharmas is unable to give appropriate form to his dynamic energies. The forms they *do* take are the energetic but fallen waves of the Sea of Time and Space, out of which he is reborn and which now serve as his weapons in the wars of the fallen Zoas (e.g. E 332). At this point, Tharmas seems to personify orality in a state of alienation from its proper expression, the latter having been usurped by the incrustations of materialist philosophy (here, the material waters of the Sea of Time and Space, which derive their dynamic power from the oral energy of Tharmas).

But even though he remains fallen, the reborn Tharmas is an unhappy participant in the wars of Eternity. Unlike the other Zoas, he has no ambition to rule, and he longs continually for the unfallen world of which he is the pastoral guardian. At the height of his fallen power, he laments:

> Is this to be A God far rather would I be a Man

To know sweet Science & to do with simple companions
Sitting beneath a tent & viewing sheepfolds & soft pastures (E 334)

He curses Urizen and Luvah for warring against each other, and offers to grant Los the power to "Rebuild this Universe" in the hopes that a new prophetic creation will restore Enion to some semblance of her former self (E 332). In his fallen state, however, Tharmas can imagine this new world only in the terms of the Devouring philosophy that governs him; the Universe he asks Los to build is "A Universe of Death & Decay," a material universe of "Earth, Sea, Air & Fire" (E 332). Tharmas thus offers to empower Los with the fallen orality that will make him a Fallen Bard. Still enslaved by Enitharmon, Los refuses, claiming "Our God is Urizen the King" (E 332). The energetic but fallen Tongue does not want the rational, literate universe of Urizen, however. Instead, he wants a false bardic paradise, a world of false poetry that will bring back a "semblance" of Enion (E 332). To force Los to comply, Tharmas removes Enitharmon (Fallen Beauty) from him, and Los reluctantly agrees to build the material body of Urizen (E 336-338), simultaneously forging "The Links of fate link after link an endless chain of sorrows" (E 336). Only after Los receives the fallen orality of Tharmas, it seems, can he begin to act creatively as a Fallen Bard. Thus the fallen Tharmas unwittingly gives power to his enemy Urizen; his desire is to restore Enion, but the effect of his lending the energy of orality to the fallen Los is to augment the power of Urizen, who controls Los through the medium of Enitharmon.

Only when Urizen's project of enforcing universal order and stasis nears its completion in the Eighth Night does Tharmas realize his error. Urizen's scheme proves to be self-defeating; his attempt to stifle all dynamism and energy ultimately cripples the Devouring imagination that feeds on these energies, and Urizen himself loses his Human Form, while the entire fallen universe begins to congeal into a "stony stupor" (E 382). Tharmas is horrified by this spectacle he has helped create, and voluntarily gives the *totality* of his power to Los, who alone retains partial access to the Edenic world through the agency of the Muses (E 383). At this point, Los hears the lamenting cry of the lost Enion (Oral Myth), and together with Enitharmon, removes the body of the Lamb from the Cross in preparation for the Last Judgement (E 385). Like the fallen Milton hearing the Bard's Song and receiving the Bard into his bosom, or the Hayley-threatened Blake hearing spirits quote the Bible, Los simultaneously hears the voice of persecuted orality (Enion) and receives its power (the power of Tharmas). He is therefore prepared for the second stage of redemption.

The Act of Prophetic Perception

The second stage of redemption, as Blake portrays it, is the act of prophetic perception, the simultaneous recognition and rejection of error empowered by the upsurge in Prolific energy stimulated by the encounter with ancient orality. In *Milton*, this stage begins when Milton recognizes the Satan of the Bard's Song as his own Selfhood, and it continues through his confrontation with Satan in the climactic scenes of the poem (E 139-140). In *The Four Zoas,* this stage begins with Tharmas' recognition of the horror of the Urizenic world, continues through Los' hearing of Enion's lament, and culminates in his decision to retrieve the body of the Lamb. The act of prophetic perception is not complete, however, until the most basic Devouring impulse, the instinctive drive towards self-*preservation* (the basis of jealousy, fear and pity), is thoroughly rejected in a momentous act of self-*annihilation*. Thus Milton rejects Satan (his own Selfhood) in a series of speeches that illuminate the dangerous power of the Fallen Bard to continually renew the incrustations of priestcraft by creating new elements of materialistic culture:

> Satan! my Spectre! I know my power thee to annihilate
> And be a greater in thy place, & be thy Tabernacle
> A covering for thee to do thy will, till one greater comes
> And smites me as I smote thee & become my covering.
> Such are the Laws of thy False Heavens! (E 139)

In place of this accumulating incrustation, Milton proposes to restore the "Laws of Eternity," and to "put off / In Self annihilation all that is not of God alone" (E 139), a process mirrored in Night the Eighth of *The Four Zoas*. The first act of self-annihilation here, Tharmas' surrender of his power to Los, has already been described. Los uses this power to begin the construction of Jerusalem, but as we may remember, he and Enitharmon are children of Ulro and not entirely free of the incrustations of materialist philosophy. "Terrified at Non Existence / For such they deemed the death of the body" (E 386), they cannot annihilate themselves until the spirit of Jesus "stood beside them in the Spirit Separating / Their Spirit from their body," and thereby demonstrating that the material body is not the absolute condition of existence (E 386). Now fully awakened from the dream of materialism, Los (replete with the energy of Tharmas) reaches into the material sky and tears down the sun and moon, destroying the fallen world and himself and Enitharmon with it (E 386). As the bardic Milton rejects his fallen Selfhood, Los-Urthona rejects his own fallen form and that of his Emanation, and these momentous acts of self-annihilation enable the climactic stage of the redemption process.

The Oral Apocalypse

Milton's rejection of Satan and Los's destruction of the fallen world have the same effect:they destroy the incrustation of priestly ideology and remove the imaginative filter that distorts the energies of orality into fallen forms. Once again free to flow spontaneously, these liberated energies erupt in a psychological and historical apocalypse that obliterates all remnants of materialist philosophy. Blake imagines these energies in two ways. In *Milton,* they are first portrayed as the "waters of life," the spiritual contrary of the material waters of Tharmas' fallen world, in an adaptation of the common Biblical metaphor expressing the power of the divine to cleanse and nourish the spirit (Jer. 17:13, John 4:1-2, etc.). Earlier in *Milton*, the Bard of Eternity had sung of these waters, claiming that the fallen, material Tongue is unable either to taste or speak of them ("Can such a Tongue boast of the living waters?"[E 99]). In the final scenes of *Milton*, however, the self-annihilating Milton (who now bears this very Bard in his bosom) can and does boast of these waters, demonstrating that his Tongue is no longer fallen. "To bathe in the Waters of Life; to wash off the Not Human / I come in Self-annihilation & the grandeur of Inspiration," he states (E 142).

In the lines that follow, Blake switches to a series of images that depict individual redemption as the removal and burning of clothing, "the rotten rags of Memory," and the "filthy garments" of "Bacon Locke & Newton" (E 142). The heat of inspiration will "purge away" these rags with the fire of Jesus (E 143), who, as we have seen in preceding chapters, embodies the fundamental principle of the Original Philosophy, the omnipotence and metaphysical centrality (thus, the divinity) of the human Imagination. As Blake explains, the fires of Jesus are "the Fires of Intellect" (E 143), the energies of the primitive state of man ("Once Man was occupied in intellectual pleasures & energies," Blake laments in *Jerusalem* [E 222]). These fires are also the "corroding fires" of Energy described in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, that "mel[t] apparent surfaces away . . . displaying the infinite which was hid" (E 39). In *Milton*, these apparent surfaces comprise the Selfhood and the entirety of the fallen perspective, and the redemption of the Fallen Bard thus fulfills "the ancient tradition that the world will be consumed in fire at the end of six thousand years" (E 39).

The association of these fires with Los confirms their symbolic link with orality, for in *Milton* Blake renames the Biblical "lake of fire" that consumes error (Matt. 13:42, 25:41, etc.) as "the Lake / Of Los" (E 140). The "fierce glowing fire" (E 117) which surrounds Los and symbolizes the energy of Prophecy is the same fire that purges away Milton's Selfhood, the same that rains down from Eternity after Los tears down the material sky in Night the Ninth of *The Four Zoas*. Like the "sounding beam" of Fuzon (E 84), these apocalyptic fires, as Blake portrays them, are defined by their extraordinary orality. They emit the sound of the Last Trumpet, which *speaks* in a world-shattering voice:

Then fell the fires of Eternity with loud & shrill
Sound of Loud Trumpet thundering along from heaven to heaven
A mighty sound articulate Awake ye dead & come
To judgement from the four winds Awake & come away (E 386)

The Urizenic world in all its philosophical, psychological, and social manifestations is incinerated by these oral flames (E 387-388), leaving the immortal self of the Fallen Bard unincrusted and pure.

Paradise Regained

The final stage of the Fallen Bard's redemption is the restoration of Eternity to its unfallen state. In the terms of Blake's historical model, this means the individual's and society's return to the psychology and culture of primitive orality. These events are expressed mythologically in the restoration of all things to their Edenic forms. In Night the Ninth of *The Four Zoas*, for example, the fallen Tharmas and Enion vanish in the flames of apocalypse, only to reappear as children, eternal primitives who are reunited in the Edenic Garden of the redeemed Vala, Emanation of Luvah and representation of Nature (E 398-400). Simultaneously, the redeemed Urizen harvests "the wide Universe" in a festival of musical orality, "loud rejoicings & triumph / Of flute & harp & drum & trumpet horn & clarion" (E 400). The restoration of Urizen to his unfallen state signifies the return of the Prolific impulse to ascendancy, and Enion is able to resume her own unfallen adult form. The embodiment of oral myth is finally reunited with Tharmas, and this restores him to his own unfallen Human Form: "Joy thrilld thro all the Furious form of Tharmas humanizing" (E 401). Tharmas returns to his role as Eternal Shepherd of a pastoral Eternity, keeping "his flocks upon the hills & in the Vales / Around the Eternal Mans bright tent" (E 406).

Los, too, has been annihilated in the Last Judgement, and the restoration of the oral cosmos brings him to regenerate life as well. He is reborn as Urthona, but remains weak, "limping from his fall," and must lean on Tharmas until the oral universe is completely restored, and "the Elements subside the heavens rolld on with vocal harmony" (E 405). As if revived by this outpouring of harmonious orality, Los-Urthona immediately recovers his full unfallen vigor: "Then Los who is Urthona rose in all his regenerate power" (E 405). He assumes his Eternal place as the embodiment of unfallen prophecy, "[i]n all his ancient strength . . . form[ing] the golden armour of science" (E 407). Blake emphasizes the primitivist meaning of these myths in the epic's final lines, stating first that "all things are changd even as in ancient times," and concluding by describing the final state of redemption as that of a reborn bardic culture: "The dark Religions are departed & sweet Science reigns" (E 407). "Science," we know from *Jerusalem*, is "The Primeval State of Man" (E 146), and *The Four Zoas* ends by identifying this state with the redemption of the Fallen Bard and all humanity.

In the final scenes of *Milton,* we see that the conclusion of the myth of the Fallen Bard expresses Blake's vision of his own psychological redemption from the assorted manifestations of Urizenic culture that threatened to incrust and choke his own inspiration (the "fiends of commerce" [E 754], for example, the "spectrous Fiend" of neoclassicism [E 756], and the "blotting & blurring demons" of the Counter Arts

Conspiracy [E 546]). Milton's final speech is a manifesto of Blakean primitivism, a defiant justification of the dictation model of composition. The oral apocalypse of prophetic fire, he states, serves "To cast aside from Poetry, all that is not Inspiration" (E 142), and there is more of Blake than Milton in the claim that the burnt-up incrustation "that is not Inspiration" will "no longer dare to mock with the aspersion of Madness / Cast on the Inspired" (142). The "paltry Rhymes" of regulated, fallen orality are also condemned, and the materialist priests who simultaneously abolish and appropriate the anthropomorphic cosmos of the ancient bards, "whose whole Science / is to destroy the wisdom of ages to gratify ravenous Envy," are identified as "the destroyers of Jerusalem, the murderers of Jesus" (E 142).

Milton's self-annihilation destroys priestly culture in all its forms, and this oral apocalypse has both a historical and a personal meaning. In the terms of his historical model, Milton is the last and greatest of the Fallen Bards, and his corruption is the poetic equivalent of Urizen's ultimate (and self-defeating) triumph, the "stony stupor" that threatens to petrify Eternity in Night the Eighth of *The Four Zoas.* Milton's fall is the proverbial darkness before the dawn, and his redemption, as imagined by Blake, liberates the incrusted prophetic energy needed for the preparation of "the Great Harvest & Vintage of the Nations" (E 144), the redemption of the fallen societies of the world (an event hinted at in the final lines of *Milton* and described in Night the Ninth of *The Four Zoas* [E 400-405]).

For Milton, however, it is too late to make use of this energy. Physical death has removed him from the realm of history (an aspect of the fallen, material world) except in the form of the "Hells" he leaves behind in his fallen poetry (E 108). He can therefore no longer function as a human incarnation of Los, who embodies Prophecy as it exists *within* the fallen world. A new vehicle of ancient prophetic energy is needed, but the obvious candidate, Blake, cannot serve as that vehicle until Milton's self-annihilation destroys the influence of these "Hells" on Blake himself. The passage of the fallen Milton into Blake's own left foot and the subsequent "redounding" of a "black cloud" over all of Europe indicate that Milton, symbol of the *defeat* of bardic energy, of the most spectacular failure of English poetry, is a profound incrustation over Blake's own prophetic spirit (E 110). Blake's poetic vision of the self-annihilation of Milton is therefore *his own* act of self-annihilation, for the fallen Milton (and all he symbolizes) is part of Blake's *own* Selfhood, and must be destroyed to remove the incrustation over Blake's own immortal self.

Thus we see that the annihilation of Los and rebirth of Urthona are paralleled in the annihilation of Milton and rebirth of Blake himself, the first fully redeemed bard in English poetic history. The fallen Milton (and the embodiment of his poetry, the Emanation Ololon) is burned up in the Fires of Intellect, and his immortal self is revealed in its Human Divinity as "One Man Jesus the Saviour. wonderful!" (E 143). The stage of *Milton*, like the stage of poetic history, is now cleared, leaving only the historical Blake ("My Soul returnd into its mortal state" [E 143]) and a future now open to liberating change. Blake is both literally and figuratively awakened, cleansed of the incrustation of Fallen Bardism, and he immediately begins to relate a new vision of an imminent historical apocalypse empowered by restored prophetic energy: "Los listens to the Cry of the Poor Man: his Cloud / Over London in volume terrific, low bended in anger." (E 144). But the restored perspective of the ancient bards finds its fullest expression in the redeemed orality of *Milton* itself (obviously composed *after* the visionary events recorded within). That is to say, the annihilation of Milton makes possible the creation of *Milton*, the primitivist *Paradise Regained*.

Blake's myths of the fall of orality and the redemption of the Fallen Bard thus constitute a primitivist autobiography that simultaneously functions as a prophetic history of poetry. This history first recounts the subordination of oral energy to the Devouring impulse, then explains how this energy is perverted by mentally subjugated Fallen Bards. Finally, it indicates that the spiritual incrustations fabricated by fallen orality may be destroyed by a renewal of *primitive* orality stimulated by the relics of ancient culture. The final historical product of this process is the bardic Blake, human embodiment of regenerate Los, sounding his own Last Trumpet in his illuminated pages and endeavouring "to Restore what the ancients calld the Golden Age" (E 555) with his mythic poetry.

Afterword

Blake never tired of imagining the destruction of the priestly cosmos. Perhaps despairing of the "Great Harvest & Vintage of the Nations" he had predicted in *Milton* (E 144), he eventually came to believe that this apocalyptic event had already occurred, the work of a greater bard even than himself. That bard was Jesus Christ, and Blake mythologizes his own primitivist interpretation of the Gospel story (which, he recognizes, "will not do / For either Englishman or Jew" [E 524]) in the fragments that comprise *The Everlasting Gospel*. The abolition of the priestly cosmos here occurs when Jesus pardons the adulterous woman (John 8:3-11), an act Blake once again frames as a victory of resurgent orality over literate fixity. Priestcraft is represented in the poem by "Moses Law," originally inscribed on the stone tablets of Sinai, and after observing (in what is perhaps a satirical pun) that this law demands that the adulteress be "stoned to Death," Blake contrasts this rigid textual instrument of repression with the vital and liberating "sound of Jesus breath," which pardons the woman and abolishes moral law, proclaiming that "Good & Evil are no more" (E 519). Jesus' world-changing utterance is both spontaneous and passionate ("Jesus spoke with authority not like a Scribe" [E 521]), and destroys a priestly cosmos conceived as a gigantic *book*. As Urizen's opened book forms the "paind heavens" that "Expan[d] from North to South" in *Europe* (E 64), the sky in *The Everlasting Gospel* is "Writ with Curses from Pole to Pole" (E 591).[1] When Jesus makes his oral proclamation of liberty, however, these "Ancient Heavens in Silent Awe /

---

[1] These portrayals of the sky as a vast *book* perhaps reflect the Deist view of Nature as "the scripture called the Creation" (Paine, *Age* 46). Note that when priestcraft and Deism (ultimately the same thing, to Blake) are destroyed, as at the end of *The Four Zoas*, the sky becomes humanized and oral: "the heavens rolld on with vocal harmony" (E 405).

All away began to roll" (E 519). Jesus then forbids the Urizenic God of Mosaic priestcraft from writing future laws. "Cease finger of God to Write," he commands, for these literate Heavens "are not clean in thy Sight" (E 521). The act of inscription on Sinai, which creates literacy and priestcraft simultaneously, also brings Hell into existence, Jesus states, asking, "Wherefore has[t] thou writ these Laws / And Created Hells dark jaws" (E 521).

This vision of a bardic Jesus shattering the universe of priestcraft with the power of orality bears marked similarities to Blake's earlier portrayals of Milton and Los. As we saw in the preceding chapter, Milton, the prototypical Redeemed Bard, annihilates Satan and his cultural products in a triumphant act of orality at the end of *Milton*, while Los, after acquiring the power of Tharmas the Tongue, destroys the fallen world by releasing the apocalyptic oral flames of the Last Judgment. Not surprisingly, then, both Milton and Los are identified with Jesus: the self-annihilated Milton in his redemption becomes One with Jesus (E 143), while the Eternal Prophet, as we saw earlier, is described in the conclusion of *Jerusalem* as the image of Divinity itself ("And the Divine Appearance was the likeness & similitude of Los" [E 255]). We see, then, that Blake conceived of the historical Jesus as the greatest of prophets, a Redeemed Bard who taught orally ("Christ & his Apostles were Illiterate Men," he writes in the annotations to Thornton [E 667]) and whose self-presentation as Son of God was the expression of his own revival of the Original Philosophy. As Blake writes in his annotations to Berkeley's *Siris*, Jesus rejected the materialist view that God was "abstracted or distinct from the Imaginative World" (associated here with the rationalist Greeks and the priestly culture of Egypt), and instead "considerd God as a Man in the Spiritual or Imaginative Vision" (E 663). That is to say, Jesus, like Blake, sees the omnipotent and divine Human Form at the heart of Jewish mythic poetry (that is to say, God) as a bardic representation of the Human Imagination, which is both the First Cause and our own true nature. As Blake writes, "Jesus considerd Imagination to be the Real Man" (E 663). Jesus was in fact the most radical and daring of all bards, a prophet who mythologized *himself* and lived out the plot of a Blakean epic, the crucifixion of the Divine Humanity (Imagination) by Priest and King. As Blake explained to Crabb Robinson, Jesus "is the only God . . . . And so am I and so are you" (Bentley, *Records* 310).

In the figure of the bardic Jesus, we see how thoroughly primitivist ideas permeate Blake's philosophy; we might fairly say that his Christianity is *an aspect* of his primitivism. It might be more accurate, however, to say that primitivist theory is the bedrock foundation of the remarkable syncretism that is Blake's philosophy. With its universalizing argument that poetry and religion were originally one (the spontaneous oral expression of innate passionate creativity), its vision of an anthropomorphic cosmos, and its historical theory of the simultaneous decline of poetry and rise of priesthood and literacy, primitivism provides a theoretical framework within which Blake is able to integrate his anti-materialism, his Christianity, his interest in Celtic-traditional mythology, his political radicalism and, above all else, his love for art. Primitivism enabled him to forge from this eccentric (but not historically surprising) hodge-podge of philosophies and preoccupations a powerful and coherent aesthetic doctrine, a theory of history, a vision of utopia, and a way of experiencing the world. The idea of orality is a crucial part of Blake's new (he would say, revived) religion, not because orality itself is salvation (the fallen Bards testify to this), but because orality, when unfettered by priestcraft, is the natural medium of passionate, imaginative self-expression. In Blake's understanding, *this* is salvation, and orality merely the form it spontaneously takes. The idea that such self-expression was identical to *happiness* is Blake's own contribution to the mélange of his philosophy, and perhaps the crucial intellectual leap that enabled him to see primitivism as the basis of a doctrine of personal and cultural salvation.[1] Reading this psychology of liberation back into the ancient texts that he believed embodied the primitive voice, he saw in the foundational legends of Christianity images of passionate artistry and daring bardic self-expression – images, indeed, of himself. Out of these materials he created Blakean Christianity, a literary-primitivist religion whose most basic principle is "Christianity is Art," a religion he both believed and *lived*, to his social and commercial detriment, and his posthumous fame.

A remarkable line from *The Four Zoas* emphasizes both the strange literalism of Blake's primitivism and the central place of orality within it. In the third Night, during Luvah's struggle to dominate the fallen Albion, Blake inserts an authorial comment that seems to embody the complexities of his prophetic position. As Albion successfully repulses Luvah ("Then frowned the Fallen Man & put forth Luvah from his presence" [E 328]), and prepares to curse him, the bardic narrator of *The Four Zoas* is assailed by doubts – perhaps the "Nervous Fear" of which he wrote to Flaxman (E 708). Would his readers understand the poem properly? Would it be regarded merely as an extravagant fiction, or worse, the ravings of madness? Indeed, Blake may be speaking as much to himself as to his readers in the defiant parenthetical line that precedes Albion's curse: "(I heard him: frown not Urizen: but listen to my Vision)" (E 328). By insisting that he

---

[1] We may recall his comment on children at play: "This is heaven" (qtd. in Bentley, *Records* 566).

actually hears the voice of Albion commanding Luvah to "Go & die the Death of Man" (E 328), Blake repudiates external (or self-) accusations that his myth is only fictional or allegorical. It should instead be understood as "Vision," a true story of spiritual realities, conceived and narrated in the terms of the anthropomorphic cosmology of the ancient bards. Thus Blake addresses his (and his reader's) doubts as a Human Form, frowning Urizen, the spirit of priestcraft working to frustrate spontaneous oral energy by questioning the validity of Blake's imaginings. That this verse *is* oral is asserted in Blake's command that Urizen *listen* to his Vision; the victory over priestcraft implied in Blake's stubborn adherence to the bardic perspective (in the age of Locke, Urizen prefers to be known as Reason, an abstract faculty rather than a Human Form) is confirmed by his insistence that his Vision is *oral*, a product of ongoing spiritual dictation and the legitimate heir of ancient bardic song. By stabilizing his (and our) understanding of his poetry as a work of primitive orality, Blake is able to defy Urizen's frowns and continue with his prophetic story.

Thus the importance of orality in Blake's work and life, and its place as the focus of this dissertation. Its study, properly historicized, unlocks new dimensions of some of his most important myths – that of Urizen, for instance, archetypal destroyer of bardic culture, bearer of the literate texts that regulate the fallen world – and that of Tharmas and Los, whose fall and redemption tell the story of the Bard's long journey through Enitharmon's Night of priestly civilization. It allows us to see that Blake was able to justify his own unconventional aesthetic and philosophical views with a Christian-primitivist theory of history (and of the psyche) that prophesied the eventual renewal of primitive orality, and that he was able to formulate a strategy for embodying the essence of orality (its fluidity, energy and passion) in the medium responsible for its decline.

If primitivist theory is as important and pervasive in Blake's work as I have argued, this thesis can only be considered a beginning. The myriad individual expressions of primitivistic orality in Blake's mythological poetry, for instance, have barely been addressed. The theoretical differences between song, speech, and noise (what we might call ordered and disordered orality), may serve as an example here. These differences are suggested in *Poetical Sketches* in the contrast between the musical Spring, Summer and Autumn, and the "groaning" and "yelling" Winter (E 410), but they echo throughout the mythological poetry. Orc, for example, is distinguished by his association with noise, such as the "Howlings & hissings, shrieks & groans, & voices of despair" that surround him in *Europe* (E 65), and "howling woe" is the lot of both Urizen and Los during their respective creations of the Wine-Press of Los and Golgonooza (E 124, 340). Such expressions of disordered orality may be the oral equivalent of the "Blots & Blurs" Blake detested in visual art (E 575), or they might perhaps embody the fallen orality of Urizen's victims, no longer able to organize itself into spontaneously appropriate forms. Other oral modes of expression like dialogue, soliloquy (a favourite of Urizen), lamentation, and song are so fundamental to Blake's myth that one could almost go through the prophetic books line by line, identifying oral modes and exploring their contextual meanings. Allusion, too, an ever-fertile domain of Blake studies, acquires a new dimension when Biblical or Ossianic allusions or imitations are considered as invocations of primitive orality, an idea with its own range of meanings. At the level of structure and meter, the question of oral *formula* in Blake also remains largely open to investigation. The presence of formulaic structures in the poetry has considered by Essick (Essick, *Language* 172-184), but recent decades have seen significant growth in our knowledge of the variety and complexity of these structures. John Foley, for example, suggests that questions of oral formula embrace such diverse matters as the structuring of episodes, the construction and handling of characters, and the use of traditional themes. The ways these formulae survive in the works of later writers helps to clarify these writers' relation to tradition, argues Foley. "Poets do not persist in employing traditional structures after the advent of literacy out of a misplaced antiquarianism or by default," he writes, "but because, even in an increasingly textual environment, the 'how' developed over the ages still holds the key to worlds of meaning that are otherwise inaccessible" (Foley, *Immanent Art* 7). Blake's use of oral formulae, in the broadest sense, and the ways these formulae might tap into the "worlds of meaning" he saw in primitive tradition are vast subjects whose exploration has only begun.

Much, then, remains to be done in the study of Blake's "audible unit" and its theoretical context, but I believe the work is worth doing. By improving our understanding of this vital dimension of his art, we make it possible to tune our ears more closely to the resonances of Blake's primitive music. This, after all, seems to be his wish. "[L]isten to my Vision," he commands, urging us to attend carefully to an *oral* vision which speaks of our "eternal salvation," as the Bard of Eternity insists (E 97). If we learn to obey this prophetic dictate, we empower ourselves to reap the significant intellectual (and perhaps, spiritual) rewards of such obedience.

Works Cited

Abrams, M.H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953.

Ackroyd, Peter. *Blake*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995.

Adlard, John. *The Sports of Cruelty: Fairies, Folk-Songs, Charms and Other Country Matters in the Work of William Blake*. London: Cecil & Amelia Woolf, 1972.

Allen, Agnes. *The Story of the Book.* London: Faber and Faber, 1952.

"An Essay on Literary Property." *Analytical Review* July 1798: 100-102.

Aristotle. "On the Art of Poetry." *Classical Literary Criticism.* Trans. T.S. Dorsch. Hammondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1981. 7-56.

Ault, Donald. "Incommensurability and Interconnection in Blake's Anti-Newtonian Text." *Essential Articles for the Study of William Blake, 1970-1984*. Ed. Nelson Hilton. Hamden, CT: Archon, 1986. 141-169.

Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility.* 1811. Ed. Ros Ballaster. London: Penguin, 1995.

Bentley, G.E., ed. *Blake Records.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1969.

---, ed. *William Blake: The Critical Heritage.* London: Routledge and Paul, 1975.

Blair, Hugh. *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. 1783. New York: Garland, 1970.

---. A *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal.* 1765. New York: Garland, 1970.

Blackwell, Thomas. *An Enquiry Into the Life and Writings of Homer.* 1736. Hildesheim, NY: Georg Olms Verlag, 1976.

Blake, William. *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*. Newly Revised Edition.

Ed. David V. Erdman. New York: Anchor, 1988.

Bloom, Harold. *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument.* New York: Doubleday, 1963.

Brown. John. *A Dissertation on the Rise, Union, and Power, The Progressions, Separations, and Corruptions, Of Poetry and Music.* 1763. New York: Garland, 1971.

Browne, Thomas Gunter. *Hermes Unmasked.* 1795. Ed. R.C. Alston. Menston, UK: Scolar Press, 1969.

Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.* 1759. New York: Garland, 1971.

Campbell, George. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric.* Boston: Charles Ewer, 1823.

Carr, Stephen Leo. "Illuminated Printing: Toward a Logic of Difference." *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality*. Ed. Nelson Hilton, Thomas A. Vogler. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1986. 177-196.

Clark, Timothy. *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing*. Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1997.

Conway, Moncure Daniel. *The Life of Thomas Paine.* New York: Putnam, 1893.

Cooper, Helen. *Pastoral: Medieval Into Renaissance.* Ipswich, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1977.

Damon, S. Foster. *A Blake Dictionary*. Providence, RI: Brown UP, 1965.

Davies, J.G. *The Theology of William Blake*. Archon, 1966.

Dennis, John. "The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry." 1701. Tillotson, Fussell and Waingrow 462-472.

Dodds, E.R. *The Greeks and the Irrational.* Berkeley: U of California Press, 1966.

Eaves, Morris. *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1992.

---. "Blake and the Artistic Machine." *Essential Articles for the Study of William Blake, 1970-1984*. Ed. Nelson Hilton. Hamden, CT: Archon, 1986. 175-209.

Edwards, Viv, and Sienkiwicz, Thomas J. *Oral Cultures Past and Present: Rappin' and Homer*. Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

Ehrstine, John W. *William Blake's* Poetical Sketches. USA: Washington State UP, 1967.

Erdman, David V. *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1969.

---. "Textual Notes." *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*. Newly Revised Edition. Ed. David V. Erdman. New York: Anchor, 1988.

Essick, Robert N. "How Blake's Body Means." *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality*. Ed. Nelson Hilton, Thomas A. Vogler. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1986. 197-217.

---. *William Blake and the Language of Adam*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1989.

---. *William Blake, Printmaker*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1980.

Essick, Robert. N. and Viscomi, Joseph. "An Inquiry Into William Blake's Method of Color Printing." *Blake Quarterly*. Winter 2002, 74-102.

Ferber, Michael. "Not for the Kiddies." *Academe*. 87.4. July-August 2001. 12 Nov. 2002. <http://www.aaup.org/publications/Academe/01ja/ja01ferb.htm>.

Ferguson, Adam. *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. 1767. Ed. Duncan Forbes. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1966.

Finnegan, Ruth. *Orality and Literacy*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.

Foley, John. *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*.

Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1991.

---. *Oral Tradition in Literature: Interpretation in Context.* Columbia, MO: U of Missouri Press, 1986.

Friedman, Albert B. *The Ballad Revival: Studies in the Influence of Popular on Sophisticated Poetry.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961.

Frosch, Thomas R. *The Awakening of Albion: The Renovation of the Body in the Poetry of William Blake.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1974.

Frye, Northrop. *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1947.

Gilchrist, Alexander. *Life of William Blake.* 1863. Ed. Ruthven Todd. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1945.

Gleckner, Robert. *Blake's Prelude.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982.

Goody, Jack. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1977.

Gray, Thomas. "The Bard: A Pindaric Ode." 1768. *Thomas Gray and William Collins: Poetical Works.* Ed. Roger Lonsdale. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977. 52-53.

Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles.* 1891. Ed. David Skilton. London: Penguin, 1986.

Havelock, Eric A. *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1982.

---. *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1986.

Hazlitt, William. "My First Acquaintance With Poets." 1823. Wu 643-656.

---. "Why the Arts Are Not Progressive." 1814. *Criticism: The Major Texts.* Ed. W.J. Bate. USA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970. 292-295.

Hilton, Nelson, and Vogler, Thomas A. "Introduction." *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality.* Ed. Nelson Hilton, Thomas A. Vogler. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1986. 1-10.

Hill, Christopher. *The English Bible and the Seventeenth Century Revolution.* London: Penguin, 1993.

Johnson, Samuel. "Rasselas." 1759. Tillotson, Fussell and Waingrow 1020-1065.

Kennedy, George A. *Classical Rhetoric & Its Christian & Secular Tradition From Ancient to Modern Times.* 2nd ed. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina Press, 1999.

Kernan, Alvin. *Printing Technology, Letters, and Samuel Johnson.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1987.

Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. 1690. Ed. Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon, 1979.

Longinus. "On the Sublime." *Classical Literary Criticism.* Trans. T.S. Dorsch. Hammondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1981. 97-158.

Lord, Albert B. *The Singer of Tales.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1960.

Lowth, Robert. *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*. 1787. New York: Garland, 1971.

Lucretius. *On the Nature of Things*. Trans. H.A.J. Munro. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Brittanica, 1952.

Macpherson, James. "A Dissertation Concerning the Antiquity, &c. of the Poems of

Ossian the Son of Fingal." 1762. *James Macpherson's Ossian.* Ed. Otto. L. Jiriczek. Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitats-Buchhandlung. 1940.

Mann, Paul. "*The Book of Urizen* and the Horizon of the Book." *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality*. Ed. Nelson Hilton, Thomas A. Vogler. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1986. 49-68.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Counterblast.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969.

---. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man.* New York: Signet, 1969.

Milton, John. "A Plan of Life." *Milton on Himself.* Ed. John S. Diekhoff. New York: Oxford UP, 1939.

---. *Paradise Lost.* Ed. Scott Elledge. New York: Norton, 1951.

Murphy, James Jerome, ed. *Quintilian on the Teaching of Speaking and Writing: Translations from Books One, Two, and Ten of the Institutio Oratoria.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1987.

"On the Changes Occasioned by Invention and Improvements in the Last Fifteen Years." *Analytical Review* Feb. 1797: 219-222.

Ong, Walter J. *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977.

---. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.* New York: Methuen, 1982.

---. *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1971.

Ostriker, Alicia. *Vision and Verse in William Blake.* Madison and Milwaukee, WI: U of

Wisconsin Press, 1965.

Paine, Thomas. *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology.* 1795. Ed. Moncure Daniel Conway. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1896.

---. "Reply to the Bishop of Llandaff." *Life and Works of Thomas Paine.* New Rochelle, NY: Thomas Paine Historical Society, 1922. 67-79.

Peacock, Thomas Love. *The Four Ages of Poetry.* 1820. Ed. H.F.B. Brett-Smith. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953.

Percy, Thomas. *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry.* 1765. London: Richard Taylor, 1812.

Peterfreund, Stuart. "The Problem of Originality and Blake's *Poetical Sketches.*" *Speak Silence: Rhetoric and Culture in Blake's* Poetical Sketches. Ed. Mark L. Greenberg. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1996. 71-99.

Pierce, John B. "Rewriting Milton: Orality and Writing in Blake's *Milton.*" *Studies in Romanticism.* 39. (Fall 2000). 449-470.

Pinkerton, John. "Dissertation on the Oral Tradition of Poetry." *Scottish Tragic Ballads.* London: J. Nichols, 1781.

Plato. *Phaedrus.* Trans. R. Hackforth. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1952.

Pope, Alexander. "The Dunciad." 1728. Tillotson, Fussell and Waingrow 683-688.

---. "The New Dunciad." 1742. Tillotson, Fussell and Waingrow 688-702.

---. "Winter. The Fourth Pastoral, or Daphne." 1709. Tillotson, Fussell and Waingrow 552-553.

Quintilian. *Institutes of Oratory.* Trans. John Selby Watson. London: G. Bell, 1891.

Rothenberg, Molly Anne. *Rethinking Blake's Textuality.* Columbia, MO: U of Missouri

Press, 1993.

Rubin, David C. *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-Out Rhymes.* New York: Oxford UP, 1995.

Sandler, Florence. "'Defending the Bible': Blake, Paine, and the Bishop on the Atonement." *Blake and his Bibles.* Ed. David V. Erdman. West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 1990. 41-70.

Santa Cruz Blake Study Group. "What Type of Blake?" *Essential Articles for the Study of William Blake, 1970-1984.* Ed. Nelson Hilton. Hamden, CT: Archon, 1986. 301-333.

Scribner, Sylvia, and Cole, Michael. *The Psychology of Literacy.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1981.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "A Defense of Poetry." 1821. Wu 956-969.

Shenstone, William. "On Writing and Books." 1764-69. Tillotson, Fussell and Waingrow 911-912.

Sheridan, Thomas. *A Course of Lectures on Elocution.* 1762. Ed. R.C. Alston. Menston, UK: Scolar Press, 1968.

"Sound Argument Dictated by Common Sense." *Analytical Review* Mar. 1795: 318-319.

Tillotson, Geoffrey, Paul Fussell, and Marshall Waingrow, eds. *Eighteenth-Century English Literature.* USA: Harcourt Brace, 1969.

Thomson, James. "The Seasons." *The Complete Poetical Works of James Thomson.* Ed. J. Logie Robertson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1908.

Turbayne, Colin Murray. *The Myth of Metaphor.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1962.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Ed. John Seelye. New York:

Penguin, 1986.

Vincent, David. *Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750-1914.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1989.

Virgil, *Aeneid.* Trans. John Dryden. New York: Macmillan, 1965.

Viscomi, Joseph. *Blake and the Idea of the Book.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993.

Vogler, Thomas A. "Hearing the *Songs.*" *Approaches to Teaching* Songs of Innocence and of Experience. Ed. Robert F. Gleckner and Mark L. Greenberg. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1989. 127-131.

---. "Troping the Seasons: Blake's Helio-Poetics and the 'Golden Load.'" *Speak Silence: Rhetoric and Culture in Blake's* Poetical Sketches. Ed. Mark L. Greenberg. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1996. 105-152.

Warburton, William. *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated, On the Principles of a Religious Deist, From the Omission of the Doctrine of a Future State of Reward and Punishment in the Jewish Dispensation.* Vol. 2. 1741. New York: Garland, 1978.

Watson, Richard. *An Apology for the Bible.* 1796. New York: Garland, 1977.

Wittreich, Joseph. *The Romantics on Milton: Formal Essays and Critical Asides.* Cleveland: Case Western UP, 1970.

Wood, Marcus. *Radical Satire and Print Culture: 1790-1822.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1994.

Wooler, Thomas. "Future Publication of the Black Dwarf . . ." *The Black Dwarf* 5 Jan. 1820: 854.

Wordsworth, William. "Preface to *The Excursion.*" 1814. *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism.* Ed. Nowell C. Smith. London: Humphrey Milford, 1925. 144-149.

---. "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (and Appendix)." 1802. Wu 250-269.

---. "Preface to *Poems*." 1815. *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism.* Ed. Nowell C. Smith. London: Humphrey Milford, 1925. 149-168.

---. "The Rainbow." 1807. Wu 269.

---. "The Thirteen-Book Prelude." 1799-1806. Wu 284-474.

Wu, Duncan, ed. *Romanticism: An Anthology.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995.